

Outpost

Fox was angry.

He had been watching old video tapes and security records for the past six hours. Twenty minutes into the study his legs developed a cramp, so he stood up, which just made the cramps travel to a different place. He was tired, and he was hungry. He wanted to know why it became his job to go through some old black and white archives of some military outpost (was it even military? It looked kind of like a weather station on steroids) from a planet he had never even heard of before today.

The room was small and so cramped that he felt like a sardine in a tin can. There was a small window behind where Fox sat, but all it did was bring a noticeable slit of glare on the screen, and because the sun had been steadily climbing the sky since he started watching, the temperature was rising to an unbearable degree, at least to the point where shirts became expendable. Storage lockers lined the walls, and the floor was littered with tapes and discs. There was a large table taking up most of the room, which Fox decided to use in substitute of a chair. The only consolation was that he didn't have to suffer this hell alone; Falco and Peppy were with him, as well as a new Starfox recruit.

On the screen, several men were busy unloading crates onto large trucks that were outfitted with treads. Fox noticed that even though they were moving brusquely, they had a certain sense of delicateness in their movements. There were three men to a crate, and about thirty crates to a truck. When a truck was filled, a massive door would open up, and the truck would slowly travel out into what looked like a frozen wasteland.

"What do you suppose is in them things?" Falco muttered as he cupped the bottom of his beak.

"Explosives?" the new guy ventured. "Supplies of some kind?"

"Where would it all go?" Peppy said. "This installation covers only one kilometer, and the nearest populated settlement is one hundred and thirty miles East of their location."

"So would there be some kind of secret structure somewhere for them to go?"

"New guy, please," Falco chuckled. "This isn't a video game."

Fox snickered as he kept watching the monochrome men moving here and there as new trucks rolled in and out. "Yeah. No continues, no saved games."

There was a silence for a little while as they all watched the screen. Fox heard Falco sigh, and the scratching of pencil on paper from the new guy as he continued to take notes (notes that would eventually be ripped up and thrown away, Fox mused). Suddenly the camera skipped, and as a strange new scene started to unfold, the vulpine frowned and cocked his head. "Look at this," he said.

A massive fire was raging, towering high and vomiting dense black smoke into the sky. The men were throwing down crates from the trucks to a small bucket brigade of brutish-looking men in uniform. They took the crates down the line and hurled them into the fire. Some of the crates broke open, and Fox could see things like fruits, bottles, tins, broken glass, something that looked like a doll, and torn clothes spilling out onto the growing pile. One crate landed off on the far end of the fire, and when it burst open Fox quickly jumped up.

"Whoa!" he shouted, sending the others out of their state of near drowsiness. Peppy himself was seated by the window, and the heat kept sending the elderly gentleman into a condition of perpetual sleep. "Where's the remote?" Fox said.

The new guy grabbed it and slid it across the table to Fox. He looked at the buttons for a moment before clicking for REWIND.

"What did you see?" Peppy muttered confusedly.

Fox didn't answer him; he wasn't so sure he even believed what he saw. He found the spot before the crate broke open and pressed PLAY as everybody leaned in for a closer look.

The crate burst again, and everybody exclaimed as they saw what fell out and tumbled through the burning rubble. Fox quickly pressed the PAUSE button.

"Is that...is that a leg?"

"That looks like a fuckin' leg!"

"Aaah, that's gross, man!"

"Eeh..."

The leg caught fire and started to burn, fur smoldering and flesh charring. Suddenly the leg started to spasm, kicking blindly through the blackened heap as if animated by some morbidly psychic muscular roots. The camera jerked backward and to the side, bringing a tall and imposing rhinoceros into view. He pulled back a huge be-gloved fist and thrust it into the camera, flashing and throwing up a grey snow-blind.

The room was quiet. Fox noticed that he was breathing heavily, and a sweat had broken out on his face; it was collecting high on his cheeks and at the end of his muzzle, trailing through his orange fur. He had seen it twice now, and still he couldn't believe it. He had seen an actual severed leg burning...and moving! He had little medical training, but with what therapeutic knowledge he had he knew that a moving severed leg was virtually impossible.

Falco blew air through his nose and shook his head. "I don't know about you guys, but I gotta use the rest room." He opened the door and quickly stepped out. The new guy coughed and cleared his throat; Peppy looked at him expectantly, but the new guy just shook his head. Somebody had to say something to break the frigid anxiety, but nobody knew what to say.

Fox clicked a button and took the tape out of the player, putting it in the growing pile of records they had already seen. He found a different one and put it in, wondering what this one had to show. "How much more of this shit is there?" he asked.

The new guy looked through a thick set of papers, shuffling through them like a regular businessman, or maybe a very formal gin rummy player. "About fourteen pages."

"Aw, damn it."

They grumbled and settled back in their seats. Fox got up and stretched his legs, cracking his back and fingers for good measure. Peppy winced when he heard those sounds; at his age he didn't quite like to hear the sounds of valuables being broken.

On the screen, the men were walking down a long corridor. Thick wires lined the walls, trailing out into wide stalls. One of them (the jolly and sociable rhinoceros from the previous tape) went into one stall, disappeared for a moment, then quickly came back out. He shouted something, and a group of men came running from all sides. They crowded around him, argued over what he was saying, gesticulating wildly with energetic hand movements. The rhinoceros looked around for a moment, then grabbed a short bespectacled snow leopard, dragging him up off his feet and throwing him back down. The men in the circle took a step back, watching and listening as the rhinoceros pointed an accusing finger at the feline. This went on for fifteen minutes until somebody had the audacity to take off running down the corridor. All the men gave chase, leaving the corridor empty and the doors of the stalls wide open. It stayed this way for about twenty minutes.

Fox finally shook his head and stood up, heading for the door. "I can't take any more of this crap, I need coffee. You guys need anything?"

"Wait," the new guy spoke up. He grabbed the remote and stared intently at the screen. "Look at this," he said. He clicked REWIND, letting the tape go back the twenty minutes until the men started chasing the lone runner.

"What is it?" Fox grumbled.

"Watch," the new guy said, pointing in the bottom right corner. It showed the time elapsing in hours, minutes, seconds, and milliseconds. The men were chasing the runner and the corridor was empty. The time showed 01:31:55:93.

About a minute later, the time showed 01:38:02:75.

"Someone did a touchup of the security records."

"New guy, please," Fox said. "This isn't a spy movie."

"Now wait a minute, Fox," Peppy interjected. "We don't even know what they were doing there."

"I don't even know what we're doing here, Peppy! What are we even supposed to be looking for?"

"Something strange or out of the usual.' That's what the Fleet Council member told me to look for."

Fox sniffed. "Yeah, that's a lot to go on. You could've asked them for something specific instead of just going along with what they had to say."

"I did, Fox! I asked them all the questions I had, but all they told me was the same damn thing. 'Strange or out of the usual.' It was all they told me."

Fox sat down with a huff and grumpily crossed his arms. He knew he was being very childish, but he didn't care. It was just the goddamn heat, and Peppy's increasing senility, and the new guy always coming up with some smart-ass remark or smarmy idea. He wanted to know why he was here, why he was wasting his time looking at all this crap that would take until next year to finish, searching for no specific thing whatsoever.

"This is ridiculous," Fox said. Peppy and the new guy said nothing. This went on for the remainder of the tape...an hour and thirty two minutes later. Peppy stood up and went out the door, telling everyone he was going to go get some water. Fox wiped away the sweat and blariness from his eyes. The new guy grabbed and fidgeted with another tape. "Do you wanna take a break, boss, while I get a start on this one?"

"No, I'm good...and damn it, new guy, stop calling me boss!"

"Sorry, I just..."

"Just put the damn tape in, new guy."

The new guy replaced the old tape with the new one and sat on the corner of the table beside Fox. They blinked groggily as the screen flashed for a few seconds before showing them a small square room on the camera. Judging by the angle and corner position, they knew it was one of the security cams. In the middle of the room was the snow leopard, bound, tied uncomfortably to a chair. Blood was dripping down his nostrils and from the cuts on his lip, muzzle, and ear. He was wearing a blindfold made from a ratty-looking towel used to degrease mechanical equipment. He was shouting something, and apparently, very loudly.

The rhinoceros was circling the prisoner, shouting something in response to his cries. The snow leopard said something and gave a particular twist of his head, and his burly captor delivered a righteous backhand to the side of the feline's face.

"Some shit's going down, I'd say," the new guy said. Fox narrowed his eyes and gripped the edge of the table angrily. Really? And just what gave that away, smart-ass? Fox wanted to say, but didn't. He didn't really want to be the only one left in this oven, watching all these records. He was sure that Falco and Peppy had gone off somewhere else, dumping the entire job onto him and the damn new guy. Sneaky bastards, Fox mused.

On the tape, the rhinoceros gave the leopard a powerful left hook to the face. Blood and flesh flew like rain, and the leopard's lower jaw landed a few feet beside the chair in a bloody mess.

Fox jerked and started coughing in surprise; the shock had formed a lump in his throat that excessive gasping could not penetrate. On the screen, the rhinoceros had taken a step back in shock, not so much horrified as he was astounded that what he had done actually had happened. For a moment, the rhinoceros swayed on his feet, then ran to the side of the far wall and started retching. Fox and the new guy leaned in close to the screen, hypnotized at the broken piece of the leopard.

The detached jaw started to wriggle on the floor.

"What the hell is this," Fox mumbled sickly.

The jaw sprouted six legs at three ends and skittered on the bloody floor like a hellish tap dancer. The tongue (Fox's stomach did a queasy barrel-roll as he saw that the tongue was attached to the jaw) rose up and an eye slowly formed at the tip. The strange little creature scuttled quickly into a blind spot that the camera could not reach. The rhinoceros, having conquered his stomach, wiped his mouth and turned back to stare at the snow leopard. He inspected the blood pool to the side, looking for something that apparently vanished. He didn't notice the feline's body beginning to shake and dance as though electricity were running through its body.

The rhinoceros stooped down to look at something--maybe a tooth. Something moved behind him, and the snow leopard--Fox wanted to scream, he wanted to scream and run right out of the room or jump out the window, anything to keep him from staring at that face and the massive wound where blood flowed down the leopard's chest and pooled over his lap--turned what remained of his face to the rhinoceros. Fleshy tendrils wriggled like bloody worms out of its mouth. It looked like a beard...a gory beard that was moving on its own volition.

A larger tentacle slid out of the feline's "beard", snaking down to the floor behind the rhinoceros, who began to stand up after his inspection of the little thing he held between his fingers. He was about to put it in his pocket when the large tentacle struck the back of his head with the force of a veteran brawler's punch. The end of the tentacle separated into four toothed flaps and enveloped the rhino's head.

Fox paused the video. He turned away so he couldn't look at the creature sitting in the chair and what it was doing, but it was already burned into his eyes, searing right through like a bullet into his imagination. His imagination did the rest of the work, and he felt what had been his breakfast leap up into his throat. He stood up and slowly paced the length of the table, trying to keep his stomach down.

"Hey, look at this," the new guy said. Fox, realizing that the last few times the new guy had said 'look at this' has so far resulted in potential psychological trauma, put a hand to his mouth and shook his head as he walked back to the screen. "What is it?" he muttered between his fingers.

"What are these guys wearing? I think I've seen that symbol before..."

"What the hell are you talking about...?"

Fox let the last syllable escape his voice in a sharp gasp. The new guy was pointing directly at the rhinoceros, who was frozen in time on the screen, his face contorted in terror and pain. The new guy held his finger on the rhinoceros's uniform and the bright, circular symbol emblazoned on it.

The symbol of the Fleet Council.

What the hell? Fox thought. The whole thing was getting weirder and weirder. The new guy took the remote and started playing it again, letting them watch the rhinoceros being massacred. A door flew open on the left side of the camera, and a rush of men burst into the room. At the front were two canines carrying flamethrowers, and they did not hesitate to let the creature in the chair have a taste of their guns. It flailed and jittered in its little prison, eventually burning and charring until it was a terribly malformed corpse, jerking to a stop. A pair of men ran into the room and doused the little room with fire extinguishers. They couldn't see the jaw-creature as it scuttled over the camera (Fox shuddered at this, particularly when the eye looked straight into the camera and blinked...or was it winking?), moved quickly across the wall, and through the open door. After the men were finished inspecting the burnt remains of the monster, they went single-file out the door.

"So what were they doing at that outpost?" the new guy asked.

"Trying to stay alive, maybe," Fox muttered. "Go get the others. They need to see this."

The new guy looked at Fox for a moment, and then went quickly out the door. Fox sat back down and kept watching the tape, going through all the information he had gathered in his head. Outside, the sun looked like a giant luminescent pumpkin, six more hours left in the day. The vulpine put his head down and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to think.

So...the Fleet Council sends us these tapes to look for something odd. Well, mission accomplished there. But they don't send us anything without screening it first, so they had to have known about this in the first place. It was their goddamn station, after all.

Okay, so some creature attacks a government-run installation...no, a government-funded installation...the corporation sees what's happening, they send the films to us, fair enough. But why ask us to look for something that they've undoubtedly already seen? Are they subliminally telling us to deal with the problem or something? No, because they're not that subtle. What the hell are they doing?

"It hides inside of you."

Fox looked up at the screen. A tall, dark-haired red fox was leaning forward over the desk. A tall bottle of Jack Daniels stood proudly close beside him, along with a small glass that sparkled like a crystal from the overhead lamplight. He wore a heavy parka with a nametag, but the camera was just a bit blurry that it made reading nearly impossible.

"When it gets inside, it takes over, and boom...no more you. You can probably feel everything that's happening to you, but I can't imagine a worse hell than that."

The fox grabbed the bottle and the little glass. He stopped and frowned, apparently thinking something over in his head, then put the glass back on the desk, taking a large gulp straight from the bottle. He set it down with a dull thud and, wiping his lips, started up again.

"Miller did a bunch of tests on it before he turned. He said that all things are made up of protoplasm and nuclei, that the nucleus is sort of a control center for the protoplasm and the rest of the cell. Only in this...this thing, the nucleus can control all of its cells at will. By this I thought he was saying this damn thing has a weak spot, but the pretentious bastard just laughed and told me that by 'nucleus' he meant 'all of its cell-nuclei.' Goddamn biologists...Thank god I'm a fucking weatherman..."

The fox took another long pull from the bottle and settled back into his chair, which squealed irritably on rusty hinges. "The storm's been going strong for about thirteen hours now. Nobody's getting out of here anytime soon...as if we had any choice.

"Spring came early this year; it couldn't have come at a worse time for us. We've been taking it in shifts of every six hours--six men standing outside, just shooting the birds as they come in from across the sea. All the bird carcasses lying in the snow, it's almost funny. We can't have that thing imitating a bird. If it does, we're all fucked."

Another pause, another swig from the bottle. Whiskey dribbled down the fox's lip and sloshed onto his desk.

"We all thought it was some dumb animal at first. No 'dumb animal' can rip out the wiring in the tractors and trucks and leave them in the rec room for everyone to see. I imagine it hasn't found the helicopter yet, or else it would have taken off by now. The bastard's toying with us, I know it. It'll sit back and watch us kill each other searching for it, and then it'll take whoever's left. Maybe that's how it hunts, using paranoia as a weapon."

Yet another pause. The bottle was almost half empty.

"There's nothing more I can do here. Just...wait and see what happens, I guess. Jacob Charnauk, meteorologist, FC outpost number thirteen."

The fox reached over and clicked the camera off, making the screen go black. Fox blinked, cold sweat pouring down his face. He was breathing very fast yet his lungs kept begging for air, as though he were drowning. Jacob Charnauk...Fleet Council-member...Peppy spoke to a Charnauk. That's where he was all of last week, at the Fleet Council center, talking to...

Just then the new guy burst into the room, sweat and blood covering his face. "Fox! I think we got a problem!"

That was when the power went out.

Fox leapt up, wondering what the hell was happening. "What's going on!?" he shouted. The new guy just shook his head to show that he didn't know either, and then ran back out the door, Fox only a few feet behind him.

The corridor was dark and hot. Red lights were periodically flashing down its length, pulsing with a light that was more menacing than cautionary. Fox was running so fast they all appeared as a straight line, and in his adrenaline-filled head he thought they seemed just a bit condescending. "Don't go this way, you stupid twat," they would say, if light fixtures could speak. He hated to admit it, but there was a twinge of fear in the back of his head that wouldn't go away.

They got to a spot where blood was splattered on the walls and streaked down to the floor. A large streak of blood began at Fox's feet and ended at a door, behind which strange, choked sounds could be heard. Fox felt a surge of fear hold in in a frozen grip, so when he ran forward and pushed open the door, it almost felt like he wasn't even aware of what he was doing, like his brain was thousands of miles away and the world around him wasn't even real, just a crazy, sinister dream.

He flung open the door, and in that first instant of comprehension he thought he saw Falco with his hands high in the air, and Peppy trying to give him a big bear hug. But that wasn't true. What he really saw was something that had been Falco and Peppy, and had twisted their bodies into some sort of grotesquely misshapen monster. It looked as if whatever it was had used both Falco's and Peppy's bodies as "blueprints" and had sort of worked on them, changing them into something that was part Falco, part Peppy, part living nightmare.

Fox stared as the creature looked at him. Peppy's face glared at him from out of Falco's chest, mouth gaping open at an impossibly large degree as rows of jagged teeth gleamed in the red light. An arm with three joints grew out of the bird's blue shoulder, grasping and flexing with sharp fingers. Six eyes glimmered with a hellish light from Falco's strange new face. Three horrifyingly bent legs kept the large creature upright, and judging by their odd shape, they could allow the monster to move backward with as much ease as walking forward.

Fox also saw the strands of thick electrical wires it held in one of its claws. They sparked and crackled, electricity within having nowhere else to go but into the atmosphere. The monster shrieked at him and dropped the wires.

The new guy shoved Fox out of the way and began firing a small-caliber gun at the creature. It roared in retaliation and reached out, sending the new guy crashing into the wall. The gun went off in the new guy's hand, grazing Fox's leg and piercing through the power control shell. The emergency lights flickered warningly, but managed to stay alive. The wires lay on the floor, sending off sparks as electricity hummed. Fox leapt for the wires, ignoring the pain that seeped up from his thigh to his brain. He landed on the ground heavily, driving the wind from his lungs. He stretched out his arm, fingers missing the wires by inches.

The creature turned from the new guy to Fox, shrieking and sputtering. It dove for the vulpine, mouths hanging open. It was practically on top of him when Fox managed to grab the wires and thrust them upward into the creature's body. It gave a pained, hateful scream as tens of thousands of volts surged through it, incinerating it from the inside. Fox jammed the wires forward into the face of what used to be Peppy, making sure they stuck. He pushed them into an eye and crawled as quickly as he could away from the writhing creature.

Suddenly he felt something grab his shoulder roughly, making him wince in pain as he was hauled up from the floor. The new guy looked at him for a moment, then held him as they ran as fast as they could out the door. Fox hobbled along, blood trailing down the gash in his thigh and soaking into his pants.

They stood outside the room, listening to the death screams of the creature. Fox and the new guy glanced at each other, waiting. After a time that seemed too long to arrive, there was a silence from the room. Fox nervously opened the door and peered inside. The creature lay on the floor, flesh crisped and blackened. The smell of burnt fur lingered in the air like a hazy black fog. For a long time, they just stared at it, fear never leaving them even when they were sure it was dead.

When the new guy spoke, it sounded loud in Fox's ears, like gunshots in a misty morning. "What do we do now?"

Fox thought. It was hard to think, but he thought and thought until an idea finally came to him.

"Get some acid. We'll dump it on this...thing."

The new guy nodded. "Alright. Just one question, though."

"Yeah?"

"Where's the acid?"

It took them a while, but they found the acid in the medical compartment, in three jars each the size of pop cans. They brought it back to the room and doused the creature, careful to use the liquid sparingly, spreading it over the large carcass. Fox wanted to laugh; it was almost like having not enough butter for your toast.

When they were finished, they managed to find their way through the labyrinth of corridors to the control room. Fox sat down roughly in the captain's chair, letting out a sharp breath. He stared out the window, watching the stars as they slowly came toward him and ebb away. They were like millions of bright sequins on a colossal tapestry of darkness. The sight had always brought him peace when he was stressed, had always cleared away his anxiety; it was his meditation. As he looked at them now, he felt as though there were danger and wickedness behind and around every little pinpoint of light, filling the void with vileness. He knew now that he would never look at the stars the same ever again.

Fox breathed a heavy sigh and closed his eyes, letting the muscles in his shoulders calm down and the muscles in his wounded leg take up the rest of the work. "So what do we do now?" he said.

Suddenly he felt the new guy jump into his lap, sending a rush of pain throughout his leg. The new guy pushed down hard on Fox's shoulders as he brought his face down low so that their noses were almost touching. Fox looked at him in surprise, about to cry out in indignation when he smelled the new guy's breath...and stopped.

"Don't you want a kiss?" the new guy said, growling low in his throat. His lower jaw split open, forming a large set of bloody pincers. Between the pincers was a circular mouth, teeth clacking anxiously. His eyes misted over into a dank black color, and when the eyes sprouted small legs, popped out of the new guy's head, and starting crawling down...Fox began to scream. He continued to scream even when the eye-spiders started crawling over his face.