

The murkiness of the ocean parted around her legs as she took her seat next to the coil of rope. The hair on her legs swayed with the tide under a tranquil gray sky. In her lap was a 50 year old, dirt smudged bottle of vodka. It had cost a good week's haul but it cheered her up. Especially in the dreary late summer days on the water. The only things to do between scavenging runs were reading the same three books and staring at the algae blooms stretching across the horizon. Behind her the light glinted off the lens of her gas mask. It occupied her shelf as long as it did her mind. Across her shoulders was her brown leather jacket, faithfully keeping her warm above her sports bra. Tarnished by years and years of wear yet still holding together. Stitched into the sleeve was a handmade emblem, with threads still clinging tight to their backing. A small orange fox peered from the side. Its eyes were ambivalent, yet threatening. Not a look of malice, but of intent to survive by any means. The fox's tail seemed to catch the wind ever so slightly. She loved the charm and the danger of her little fox. She was Fox, and no one could tell her otherwise anymore.

The crashing of water shattered the peace as Adelaide broke the surface. As she gasped for air Fox briefly mourned the silence before opening their first conversation of the day.

"Anything good?"

Adelaide shook her hair free. Dark curls were pulled down by the weight of the water. Her arms scrambled to grab on to the edge of the raft, and when her hands landed Fox noticed her ragged fingernails. Her nervous habit, she knew. Under one short nail was a splotch of red.

"Nah. Don't think we're floating above anything worthwhile. Just suburbs."

"Shit. Can't hardly tell where we are with the sea like this."

"Mhmm..." Adelaide's facial expression slid into one of unmistakable disappointment.

"It's okay, it's gonna be okay." She said unconvincingly.

"I sure hope so. We need another good score before winter or--"

"-I know, I know. Just let me think."

Adelaide's face shifted from disappointment to dry cynicism. She arched an eyebrow and watched Fox gaze at the horizon again. She had a cute sort of determination to her. Fox had shaved her head again just a week ago. The heavy jacket she wore rode up and down with her shoulders as she took deep breaths. Despite the respect she had for her, as Adelaide watched Fox think she imagined the sound of two dice clacking together in a cup.

"There's still time in the season for one more run through the mainland." Said Fox.

"Of course you'd say that."

"C'mon doll, work with me here."

"I ain't setting foot on that shitheap again this season."

"This ain't exactly my first option here."

"Then we'll find a better one." Her attitude warranted a scoff from Fox.

"The mainland's not that bad. It's a real calm time of year."

"You can say that."

"I actually can. It's too hot for them to be laying filament during the day. Can't settle over 98 degrees."

Adelaide sighed. Fox tried not to smirk. There's nothing better than being right.

"Fine, one more run. I can't believe you."

"Hell yeah. You can't help but pity me, huh?"

"Mhmm. You're like a sick puppy."

No response from Fox. She let her have that one.

The two started packing their gear, loading their packs with water, snacks, dry socks, respirator filters, handloaded ammo and batteries. Fox tied her boots as Adelaide fuelled the motorboat, and as she finished she ritualistically tapped the patch on her shoulder. Still there. She was still there, too. Thank God. The sea dragged listlessly along the edge of their raft. She tried to breathe and slow her heart rate. Her heart kept thumping a rhythm that clashed with the waves, singing atonal polyrhythms that mirrored her state of mind. Excitement and paranoia both wrestled for dominance. When the boat's motor roared for the first time in a month excitement won out decisively. An adventure was just what she needed.

Behind the gray haze of clouds on the horizon the sun glowed red, like a heating coil cooling down. Fox felt the air beginning to chill. The two would set off at sunset and be home by dark. They were both on the precipice of leaving when something caught Adelaide's eye.

"Hey there, buddy."

"Meow."

"You hold down the fort for us, ok?"

The cat looked away, disinterested.

"No? What if we brought you something tasty back?"

The cat was still disinterested but meowed nonetheless.

"Alright silly, it's a deal. Be back soon."

Her boots thumped against the sheet metal flooring as the cat settled in for an early nap. Fox was waiting for her in the boat. The motor rumbled just enough to drown out the waves. Adelaide dropped into the boat and took a deep breath. Fox unhitched their motorboat then gripped the steering. And off they went. Adelaide took a glance at their home as they sped away from it. A bundle of tires, scrap metal and wood, bobbing on top of the waves under a sullen sky. A twinge of scarlet landed on Fox's freckled face. Her eyes were on the horizon ahead, looking hopeful. The wind flew through Adelaide's hair. Her grip tightened around the edge of the boat.

The smell of a billion corpses was overwhelming every time. Even through the respirator the stench invaded their lungs. Sun dried flesh laid on hot sand. For decades marine life washed upon the shore, slowly boiled by the rising ocean temperatures. Body upon body washed ashore only to be devoured by the massive roaming packs of scavengers. What wasn't eaten decayed under a fluorescent red sky. All that remained was bone, and so the bones grew brittle. Winds blew and water rushed in and out with the tide and the remains turned into a fine bone powder. As the powder mixed with the sand the beaches were stained with dull white streaks like milk stains. And so the legions of fish were all buried in a grave of their own kin. Thousands of miles of death stretched around the continent.

The white 'sand' crunched under their bootheels as they tied their boat down. Higher up on the shore as the bone grew thin the beach gave way to sickly grays and tans. Fox scooped some of the mixture up and felt it through the tips of her fingers. Some grains were sharp; others slipped right out of her hand. Each speck had a slightly different shape. A degree of uniformity between the particles had not yet been reached. Adelaide shot her a glare and Fox dropped the sand with a flick of her wrist.

Only a couple feet from the end of the shore was a parking lot. The asphalt of the lot was made of a matrix of square blocks, with white blocks used to denote individual parking spaces. Not a single car was parked. The only occupant was a particularly hardy species of weed that had wormed its way through the pavement. Across from this lot was another parking lot in much the same shape. It was flanked by yet more parking lots. The pavement stretched as far as the bone did for all they knew. There was still walking to do before they'd find anything notable. Half a mile of parking lots sat between them and the commercial buildings where the skyline started. Despite the space allocated, not a single vehicle occupied any of them.

The farther they got from the ocean, the more they could hear their footsteps on the asphalt. Two gentle sets of footsteps, the sound of the ocean churning ever more distant, and the sun above bathing them in scorching light. Fox was sheltered below her bandana, her hunched posture further hiding her face from the sun. Meanwhile, Adelaide's frown was separated from the rest of her face by her dark mirrored sunglasses. The glasses, paired with her wide brimmed hat, gave the impression that she was some high minded socialite too good for this ordeal. This impression was countered by the shotgun slung over her shoulder. She kicked a chunk of pavement down the way with the tip of her steel toed boot. It rolled down the way towards the haze of heat rising from the pavement. Despite the size of it, the pavement chunk weighed only enough to not be blown away in the wind.

"What's on today's grocery list?"

"The usual. Plus, Devin said they need tools on his station."

"Cool. I think I can lug a whole toolbox out of here if it means we get to eat this month."

Fox had instinctually started fiddling with her gun instead of making eye contact. In the waning sunlight she could see every scratch in the black steel. The wood furniture was sporadically scuffed, revealing the lighter unfinished wood beneath. This old dog had an eventful life. Passed from government to guerilla to scavenger over mountains and deserts and jungles. It was a heavy thing. It felt good to be the one holding it now. Every locking piece slid easily into its place after so much wear. While they certainly couldn't make guns out of wood anymore, there it was in her hands anyways. A little piece of old world excess still hanging on. Argentinian steel, Brazilian wood, and Belgian engineering.

When they finally reached the row of buildings Fox stuck out her hand and dragged it across the white walls of the storefront building. Her fingers found the horizontal striations of where the filament had been laid. The sensation pleased her, so she dragged her hand along as she walked until the tips of her fingers started to tingle. Each monotone gray storefront blended into the next, each separated by an ocean of parking. The minimalist glass construction of every building's doorway was speckled with salt and grime. Inside the LED lights still shone down on linoleum floors. Only the basic infrastructure for a retail store existed. 2 shelves, the checkout station, and window stands where merchandise would be shown off had there been any. Decay seeped into the buildings wherever it could. Every cluster of stores was its own hellishly white Ozymandias coated in sand and plastic.

The sea of mini-mall buildings suddenly dropped off. As they approached all that was visible was the plexiglass shielding on their side, and the same shielding small in the distance. A protected skyway connected the two sides. A handful of window panels on it had fallen out, or been removed. Sand had battered the windows that remained. Their footsteps began to echo once they entered the skyway. Fox immediately felt a little lightheaded as soon as she looked out the windows and into the chasm they were above. Below, countless lanes of asphalt sat unused. Sand whipped through the highway on the sea winds. Only 2 cars occupied the highway. Both skeletons. Stripped of any worthwhile parts. One van had been turned into a shelter long abandoned. Otherwise, the streets were barren. Cracks in the road ran like recursive veins. The lanes of the highway themselves were veins of a kind, but

ones that had run dry long ago. 30 yards above the highway, Adelaide shook her companion back to reality. Fox remembered to breathe again.

“C’mon. Daylight ain’t forever.”

Still the image lingered in her mind, bleeding into her thoughts. Again she took to dragging her hand along the side of the plastic buildings. She thought what she had seen was beautiful. She’d seen an entire tragedy layed out in the concrete. In some ways she resented how the world was. This cancer had already won its battle. Still, these wastes had their charms. They were bathed in irony. Buildings without people. Roads without cars. Shops without products. The social contract this infrastructure had fulfilled was null and void. Now it all belonged to her. She’d probably seen more of the city than the people it was meant for. It was a thing of beauty in that way. An artifact from another time that she got to pick apart.

Now her daydreaming was interrupted by the cold touch of metal. The maintenance unit was painted as white as all the other buildings, but felt much different beneath her fingertips. The serrations of printed plastic were gone, replaced by the much smoother finish of recycled aluminum. She knocked on it twice. A hollow rumble from inside.

Adelaide pressed her shotgun against the hinges of the door. The sound of her shots blasted through the air, scaring birds and bouncing off walls to reverberate in their ears. They both pulled the straps of their masks tight. Inside a slew of server racks sat dormant. Many moons ago their lights had blinked off for the last time. The expensive parts were already gone. Only a few network interfaces were left, with their ethernet cables stripped. Fox clicked on a flashlight and began to poke around, wide eyed and oblivious. Adelaide only gripped her shotgun tighter. Without the noise of the sea, only filtered breaths and careful footsteps could be heard. Particles sailed lazily through the beam of the flashlight. Fox tapped her boot on the floor. Her companion had seen this move before but still felt stupid being in the room with her as she did her asymmetrical jig. Eventually her boot found its target, a small indent in the dusty metal floor. Reaching a hand down into it to pull

took force, but eventually snapped the hatch in the floor open, sending a plume of dust into the air. Below, a ladder into the maintenance tunnels awaited them.

Miles of pitch black tunnels stretched under the city. Utility pipes twisted and bent around each other, carrying nothing to nowhere. For a while, the only scores to be had were stray extension cables. Most of the walls had been torn up, as if someone had dragged a rake through solid metal pipes.

When her eyes ran over it, her heart jumped. Its red paint was barely scuffed. She ran her hand over the cold metal lid of the box, flipped the latch open and was greeted by a bouquet of gleaming tools. Sorted by row. Kept as a complete collection, a few were wrapped in tape at the handle for grip. She was looking at something beautiful. Not just the commodity she would trade for 2 month's supplies, but something that someone once cared for. Something she could be proud to have found.

Fox's compulsive giggling was suddenly broken by a sharp trill. Adelaide had whistled for her. Specifically, she whistled their danger sign. Two high notes. She stowed the tools in her bag and hurried off, rifle in hand.

Adelaide was already white knuckling her shotgun. Down the corridor, no sign of any activity. Still, the two attempted their escape as carefully as possible. Every corner was approached with a flashlight and a hair trigger.

"What's the problem?"

"Heard something big clawing around. Swear on my mother."

"You sure? It's all quiet down here."

As Fox cleared another corner her flashlight illuminated something huge. Layers and layers of rusted plate metal overlapping sprung to life. Wet vines slid off its hulking body. Metallic screeching filled the air while the two threw their backs against a wall. Just then, red and blue lights burst from their assailant. A distorted siren call wailed at them as their attacker began to speak.

"Tre-Tre-Trespassing is a caaaaapital offence. Cease immeeeediately!" creaked the old robot through waterlogged speakers. A baton wielding arm wildly swung at them, though the machine was barely bipedal due to neglect. It was too big for the corridor anyways, again grinding against the walls in a flurry of sparks. Fox let a staccato of bullets ring out against it, joined by the percussion of Adelaide's shotgun. Despite its disrepair, the drone was ravenous in its persecution. They had to backpedal, and fast.

Footfalls and gunfire alternated as they made their confused retreat through the maze of tunnels. Another legal threat poured out of its speakers.

"Assailants haaave escalated-ed-ed - authorizing increeeeeeased use of force."

An ancient lock popped its seal, and out shot a 40mm canister with a loud thunk. The projectile sailed directly into Fox's arm. Under the impact, she let out a flurry of profanity and nearly dropped her rifle. The canister dropped to the floor with a hollow clattering and began to hiss. Adelaide tightly grabbed Fox's good arm and started running away as fast as they could together. The machine's vigor barely wavered as it continued dragging itself to its targets. Under the intense red and blue flashing Fox couldn't yet tell if she was bleeding. All she knew was she could barely move her arm, and that the pain burned deeply.

A couple twists and turns let them gain enough distance to catch their breath. Adelaide was sweating intensely as her breath echoed through her rebreather. Still the siren wailed a tortured malfunctioning cry throughout the tunnels, searching for prey. Adelaide finished thumbing shells into her gun and began to inspect Fox's wound. As she rolled her sleeve up, a massive bruise revealed itself almost immediately. Fox winced as she ran her hand over her skin.

"Oh darling girl..." She whispered and let out a sigh.

"We have to change our approach. We haven't scratched that thing and by now we're completely lost."

"I know, doll. I've got an idea. I think it'll work. I mean. It's gonna work."



Fox chuckled through her pain and slumped against the wall.

“Stay right there, doll. Be just a sec.”

“What? What are you doing?”

But Adelaide had already disappeared into the dark.

“Oh fuck you!” Fox rasped. All she could do was listen to the sound of her own breath through her filters. At least she could rest. If only she didn’t think about it, the waiting would pass quietly. Waiting and waiting. The minutes dragged on as she felt like melting into a puddle and dripping down the sewer grates.

Fox’s self pity session was interrupted by the terrible sound of metal crashing like waves. Creaking and scraping erupted down the hallway. The drone began groaning something unintelligible as it dragged itself toward her. She tried pushing herself to her feet, but felt the scalding pain of her arm wound instead. Her weapon had run dry minutes prior. Fear had now paralyzed her entirely, locking her joints in place and her eyes wide open.

Weathered metal hands made their crushing intent clear as they pulled the drone ever closer. Its sensor array still blazed red with hatred. To the machine’s surprise, a shot rang out. From behind. It tried to push its head to look behind, but struggled as its joints whined in protest. The scraping reached a terrible pitch that echoed through the tunnels. It began to thrash in a desperate attempt to face its attacker.

Adelaide had mounted the drone, and was cutting fistfuls of wires out of the hole she had blasted. Still the robot thrashed, nearly crushing her hand as she gripped it. It only angered her further. She throttled the robot’s sensor array until it came loose then discarded it like trash. At last, a cable she’d pulled had ceased the machine’s movement. She laid her head on the machine shoulder, next to the neck which once held its sensor array, and let out a tired breath. A trickle of blood flowed down her shoulder.

Both of them were out of stamina sitting against the wall panting. Fox was wrapping her companion's arm in gauze as Adelaide smoked pensively. Whatever tirade she was cooking up in her head, Fox braced herself for it. But it never came. Instead Adelaide wrapped her arms around tight and shut her eyes. She felt her warm breath on her neck. A few moments passed in silence.

"Don't you do stupid shit like that ever again." Whispered Adelaide.

"You too." She whispered back.

She grinned at that before sliding over to pick at the guts of their assailant. Its back panel was only loosely held in place. She dislodged it in a mere second but paused upon seeing its innards. She beckoned for Fox to join her. The scene inside its guts was a complete mess. The racks where the internal hardware of the mech would normally sit were missing completely, leaving each device hanging by its wires. The plastic racks had been replaced entirely by a spread of mushrooms.

"I think I've seen this type of mushroom before." Said Fox.

"Oh?"

"For sale at the market on the *Aurora*. They smelled nice."

"I'll grab some."

"Thanks."

They began pulling the processing units from their sockets. Each one resisted for only a second before snapping free of its cables. Then Adelaide worked her pocket knife into the socket and began carving out the shelves of mushroom. After tucking them away, they set off wandering for the nearest maintenance hatch.

The surface air was far colder than it was when they had arrived. The moon painted the endless white boxes a quiet blue. They could just make out the stars behind the atmospheric haze. Her bones ached and creaked, but they had no choice but to make the trek back. Distantly the ocean still churned. It was the only sound to accompany their labored breathing and heavy steps. The rest of the world was draped in frozen silence.

20 minutes later, an explosion in the distance. Both turned their heads to scan the horizon for danger. The object of their attention however, was far above the horizon. A vapor streak followed its ascent. Booster sections were jettisoned over the bay as the rocket rumbled ever upwards. Behind it, the moon still stared down on all of them. The city lights of New Apollo sparkled like diamonds on its face.

After a long, painful day, the only suitable ending was a late dinner together. Mushrooms and rice sizzled over what passed for a stove. Fatty oils mixed with earthy flavor into a savory dinner to make the troubles melt away. The smell was torturously enticing after all they'd exerted. As Adelaide stirred the pan, Fox clung to her side. The pain in her arm still bit at her. But she could take it. So long as she had company. Making it into an obligation in her mind made it easier to bear. She had a duty to her comrade that her mortal pains would not stand between.

At last they sat adjacent to each other with a warm bowl in hand. A weight lifted from them. The fire sparked on gently throughout their meal. On the radio, the third rock and roll song in a row played. A polite little cat once again begged for attention.

"Hey bud. Kept my promise." Said Fox as she flicked him a bit of her meal.

The cat made a weird little face while snapping up the mushroom. Adelaide started giggling. Waves lapped gently against their home as they laughed together.