

### ////==Chapter 3: The Voice in the Spritebot==\\

Reality returned to me like it had left: with a slow oily feeling all over my body, made worse by the return of the sick feeling that accompanied advanced stages of radiation poisoning. I wobbled a bit as the feeling of being myself once again asserted itself, but I managed to keep my upright sitting position. Looking around, I noticed that the dingy room was pretty much the way it had been when I began my little excursion: peeling gray walls, crumbling floor, and the bowel-churning mixture of aromas that was sickness, drug abuse, and death. I heard a grumbling from the cell next to me and looked over to see Erratic Key stirring. I gingerly made my way over to the bars dividing us. "Hey there, Key. How are you holding up?"

Key blinked groggily at the floor, his head hanging limply. "What happened?" he croaked.

I sighed. "Well, as far as I can tell, we got our asses handed to us by radiation after we fought those... things in the crater." My stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch, and I groaned. "Oogh, uh. I can't really be sure, but I'm pretty sure the both of us have some very advanced radiation poisoning right now. If we don't get any Rad-Away before the end of the day, I... well..." I let my gaze wander, unable to meet Key's eye. "If we can get out of these cages, though, that hopefully shouldn't be too much of a problem. With all the chems these Raiders have-" I held a hoof to my mouth as my stomach tried to eject itself through my throat. Mustering all my willpower, I managed to force it back down, gagging at the bile. "Ugh. Sorry. Like I was saying, hopefully that won't be a problem."

I looked to Key, trying to figure out some way to get out. "Do you think you can use your magic to escape somehow?"

The beleaguered unicorn turned his head to face me, an act that looked like it took quite a bit of effort. His gaze swept up to my head, where the Recollector was still perched, then back to me. "Whose is that?" he asked, a dangerous tone in his voice.

I tried to look anywhere but at Erratic Key. "Oh, uh, it's, uh... it's yours." I turned and braced myself for the oncoming shitstorm.

"What. Did you see?" he said, breathing heavily between each word like my viewing the orb was a personal attack on him.

"Well, I'm not really sure. There-" another lurch of the stomach. "Ulp. You were in... some house or something, and I guess your niece was there? Congratulations, by the way. Uh, she had just had a birthday, and you and your... brother? Were going to go scavenging, and you didn't want her to go, but he did, and OH YEAH-" My insides did not like the sudden exertion, and responded appropriately.

Luckily for Key, I was able to aim my head away from him.

I wiped my mouth with a pastern, the cold analytical part of me noting the blood. "Ugh. Fucking radiation." I turned my gaze back to Key. "So yeah, your Cutie Mark-"

"Shut up."

"I... what?"

"Shut up," Erratic Key hissed. "Shut up and keep your eyes shut, if you don't want someone eating you tonight." He turned from me and looked around, but for what, I had no idea. "No matter what you hear, don't you dare open your fucking eyes." He closed his eyes and began to breathe heavily, his horn starting to glow slightly.

As Erratic Key began concentrating, I felt something in the pit of my stomach, and it was something other than the radiation. It was something that I hadn't felt since... wow. I realized that since I left the PMRF I had yet to have an entire day without some soul-shaking terror besetting me. I averted my gaze as my travelling companion requested, but as I did so, I began to think.

*Why am I even travelling with this stallion? Nothing but bad news seems to follow him around. Heck, even in the past he seemed to have issues with other ponies.*

*Because he can help create the Cure.*

*Yeah, but I didn't have to follow him. I did that of my own volition.*

*No, you did that to get back in good graces with Medley.*

*Maybe. But thinking back on it, do I really care that much about her? Yeah, she's got the looks, but she's like sandpaper when it comes to relationships.*

The image of Barrel grinning after I had helped her with her terminal flashed in my mind.

*Now there's a mare who has it going on.*

*So if you're no longer doing this for Medley, why do it?*

*For her. For all the ponies in Pittspur.*

*Really? Is that your only motivation? No pony does anything simply out of the goodness of their hearts.*

*Why?*

*Because this is the Wasteland. This is how things work here. The sooner you can get that through your thick head, the better chance we have of not dying.*

I had no response to that. Against Key's warnings, I cracked one eye open, followed by the other one flying open to match. In place of where the unicorn was lying, there was now a large pile of Dash inhalers, Buck bottles, and Med-X needles. I hesitantly turned my gaze to the door of his cell. In place of the lock was a ball of compressed metal. I once again felt the bottom of my stomach drop out in fear, but this time it was for the pony who was no longer there.

*Sisters, Key, what have you done?*

Before I could wonder why I didn't hear Key smash the lock, I was interrupted by the sounds of carnage in the distance, carrying through the apparently not-too-large building. With each gunshot, crunch, and meaty squelch, my fear for (and of) my travelling partner grew. Finally, the sound of agonized sound of my own cage's lock being crushed caused me to turn my head. There stood not Erratic Key, but a simulacrum of him, radiating an unsettling calmness, with the occasional twitch belying his inner struggle to stay alive. I staggered to my hooves. "Oh, Sisters! Key, you... did..." I looked back at the pile of empty chem containers. "You took all of those!? How in the world did-" Then I noticed the large chunks of flesh missing from his side. "Oh, that can't be good." In my shock my brain was providing me with only cliches to go on. "We need to find... uh..." I pushed past Key, searching for the appropriate chems. I stumbled my way through several rooms, each one more nightmarish than the last: here a Raider with a hunting rifle impaled through his head, there a body torn to shreds, an almost-unrecognizable chair leg nearby smeared with brain matter.

All told, I managed to find two healing potions, a dose of Hydra, some Fixer, and luck upon luck, an intact bag of Rad-Away, all of which I balanced carefully on my back as I made my way back to Erratic Key. However, when I reached the room that housed the cells, I found the unicorn in question on his side, spasming. "Key!" I rushed to his side, my stomach complaining at the sudden acceleration. "Oh Sisters, why now? Okay, Key I need you to stay with me!" I opened the tin of Fixer and tipped it into my hoof, pouring out a single white pill. "Key, you need to take this. It's Fixer; it'll help with the side-effects."

I gently tipped the pill into Erratic Key's mouth and massaged his throat until I felt him swallow. "Okay, now that we have this in you, we can get you healed up." I poured a small measure of the ruby health potion into my prone companion's mouth, waited for him to swallow, and repeated until both bottles had been consumed. With Key's wounds addressed, I could then turn my attention to another pressing matter: our radiation sickness. I reached for the pouch of Rad-Away, but stopped when I realized a problem: Rad-Away was meant to be taken intravenously. I glanced to Key, a concerned look on my face. "Okay, uh... this might cause problems down the line, but it's either this or there won't be a 'down the line.'" Then again, considering that the Rad-Away was scavenged from Raiders, I wondered if it was even relevant.

Banishing the thoughts from my mind, I pushed one of the long bits of metal that was lying on the floor into a standing position in some of the rubble, hung the bag from the top, pushed the needle into Key' foreleg, and waited. When the bag was half-empty, I pulled the needle out, wiped it off on my pastern, and, bracing myself, pushed the needle into my own foreleg.

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Hours passed with me sweating out the effects of the Rad-Away, and Key sleeping the sleep of the nearly-dead that I had become so familiar with in my time at the PMRF. Once I could move without causing my stomach to flip over like an airborne pegasus, I found myself rummaging through the Raiders' possessions, looking for anything that could be of use. As I did, I couldn't help but marvel in the oddly uncivilized way that the Raiders went about their lives. I saw no indication of any sort of hygiene at all: there were no water tanks to shower with, no separation of what normally would have been taken care of in an outhouse from living space, and no functional sources of heat that could have been used to cook. It was an almost Zen, in a strange, perverse sort of way.

Then I saw the room decorated with the corpses of victims past, and all those thoughts vanished like so much smoke.

I returned to my travelling companion having found enough almost-decent cloth scraps to cobble together a makeshift pair of saddlebags, into which went some two hundred year old Fancy Buck Cakes (still in pristine condition), a single bottle of Shimmer Soda (with a label featuring some mint-colored pony happily declaring that her product contained no more than 2% peach juice by volume), and the Recollector (somehow still intact). I noticed Erratic Key begin to stir, and I sat next to him. "Please, for the love of the Sisters, let me know when you're going to do something like that next time!"

Key tried to stand back up, but his legs gave out and he flopped back to the floor. "Are we still here?" he asked through heavy breaths. "We should have left... how long?"

I pulled a relatively less-rusty can from a pile nearby and pulled the cork out of the bottle of soda, pouring out a measure of the toxicly-pink liquid. "It's been a few hours. Here; it was either this or alcohol, and you need to keep hydrated."

Erratic Key took a sip, coughed, and took another. "A few hours?" he asked, voice hoarse, "Why are we still here? We need to..." He tried to stand again, grunting with the effort, but his body was having none of that, and he slumped down again. "We need to get out of here in case there's more of them. There's no telling how many of them could have been out."

I poured some more soda. "Yes, but you're in no condition to go anywhere. Besides, if I was carrying you, I wouldn't be able to fight, not that I'd be able to do much against the Raiders in the first place, what with not having a weapon and all."

"No we need to..." He let out an exasperated sigh. "Fuck. Fine, then where are we, exactly?"

I nudged the can pointedly towards Key's prone form. "Well, if I had to guess, I'd say we're probably somewhere in Junkie territory. It's more north of the crater than we were, but I have no idea exactly where. From what I've heard, the Junkies are a pretty big threat in Downtown."

"Alright," Key said, pushing away the can. "Hostile territory. No idea where we really are? Where's our stuff?"

I took a sip of the soda for myself from the bottle and pulled one of the snack cakes from its wrapper, offering it to Erratic Key. "I honestly can't say for certain. As to our stuff, I saw a promising-looking safe in one of the other rooms, but it's locked."

"I'll get to that," he said, pushing away the snack. "Anything else of note? Caps, weapons, food? How about my collection?" At that last sentence, Key shifted his gaze to a spot some three feet to one side of my head.

"Key, you really need to eat something, and this is the best I could find. Come on, you need to get your strength back up."

"You're changing the subject, Data Disk."

"Yes, because I'm concerned, Key. Right now your surviving is more important than getting our things back, because, quite frankly, without you, I'm dead out here."

"I seem to be very much alive right for now, Disk, so I'll ask again: where are my memories?"

Hearing Key's resilience to being cared for made my coat start to stand on end. "Well you might be alive right now, but I want to make sure you stay that way. So listen to the pony who has medical training, and eat your food!"

Erratic Key finally relented, taking a grudging bite and glaring at me as he chewed.

I sighed. "Thank you. To answer your question, I did not see your 'collection,' but I imagine it is probably with the rest of our stuff."

"If you've checked everywhere else," Key said, starting to push himself to his hooves, legs trembling with the effort, "Take me to that safe."

I grunted as I helped Key up and draped his right foreleg over my back. "Right. It's not too far, luckily." The two of us made our way to the back of the building, behind a very odd display featuring the remains of what looked like three robotic pigs holding instruments standing in front

of a barn. There was a small blue button next to the display, its glow providing a small additional amount of light to the dingy area.

Sometimes Pre-War technology baffles me.

We passed into a back room that was filled from floor to ceiling in shelves lined with empty boxes, their food long ago eaten, decayed, or destroyed. The bodies of Raiders cluttered the aisles, some no more than skeletons, others still fleshy, but both made travel difficult. Eventually, though, we made it to the safe. Well, it wasn't so much a "safe" as it was an "armored closet with a lock." I looked to Erratic Key. "Any chance you can get this open?"

"Yeah," he said, looking at the lock. "I don't have any picks, and in this condition..." Key sat down in front of the safe, contemplating something. "All right, go bring me some Dash," he said after a bit.

My jaw figuratively hit the floor. "WHAT!? No! After that massive dose you just had, you want MORE!? Do you even realize what that stuff *is*, much less what it *does* to you!?"

"Yeah, it lets me get my shit back," Key said, his voice flat. "Now am I going to have to find some myself, because the less energy I can spend the better."

"I... drgh..." I was too frustrated for proper words. "NO! That shit, which by the way, is literally the vapors from Brahmin shit, absolutely DESTROYS the serotonin reuptake inhibitors in your brain, causing temporary euphoria and an increase of activity in the arcane cortex of unicorns. However, over time, you become literally unable to function without it until you fucking DIE! Do you want that Key, huh!? DO YOU!?"

"We're past that point already, Disk," Key said, looking back at the safe. "Do I need to ask again?"

The simplicity of his answer deflated my anger like the air being let out of a pressure cast. I sighed deeply. He was right. If he was this far into addiction, then, as he said, he literally needed that Dash to open the lock. "I'll be right back... I think I saw some back in the... everywhere." Probably because of my mood, I couldn't help but try and lift the atmosphere with a petty attempt at humor.

I sat Key down in front of the locker and returned to the front of the store and grabbed a hooffull of the Dash inhalers that littered the ground. I turned around and was just about to enter the back room when I heard the click of the door opening.

"We're back. Anypon- what the fuck!?"

*Oh shit.*

I ran as fast as my still-aching legs would carry me to back to Key. I nearly threw the Dash at him in my panic. "Okay, Key here's your drugs now let's get going, we have company!"

"Told you," Key said, taking a large lungful of Dash. His horn began to glow brightly, and the lock on the safe popped open with a burst of light blue magic. The door swung open, and Key pulled a familiar-looking metal apple from the clutter inside, along with a burlap sack that I assumed held his collection of memory orbs. "Grab something and get ready... and pray they're all together." Levitating the dud grenade in front of him, Key made his way to the door to the front of the shop.

I quickly looked through the rest of the weapons, hoping for-

*Seriously? I just can not get rid of this damn thing!*

Right next to a beam pistol and a spark battery sat Grief. Against my better judgment, I scooped the entirety of the locker's contents into my saddlebags, stuck the battery into the pistol, grabbed it with my mouth, and ran after Key. I caught up with him crouching behind the partially-opened door to the front of the store. I took the corner on the opposite side. "Usual plan?" I then realized what I had said.

*Sisters above, this stallion is going to get me killed. It hasn't even been five days, and already we have a 'usual plan' for battle. What am I doing?*

*Not dying.*

*That's the hope...* I tightened my grip on my pistol.

"We'll find out," Key said, taking the moment to peek into the main room. Having sized up the situation, he threw the dud grenade.

Seeing Key throw his "grenade," I peeked my head around the corner. There were five Raiders, each armed with something different: a red stallion with a pipe, a dark mare with a sniper rifle, a massive stallion wielding what was unmistakably a gatling laser, a brown one with a sawn-off shotgun, and (I winced at seeing the last one) a yellow unicorn with a broken stump of a horn bearing an entire bandolier of dynamite.

"Fuck!" The brown Raider articulated, "Grenade!"

The Raiders scattered, the one with the pipe hiding with the brown one behind a checkout counter. The big one with the gatling laser took a few steps to the left, almost bumping into the dark yellow one with the broken horn, who hadn't moved for whatever reason. The slight one with the sniper rifle had disappeared completely behind a shelf.

While they were disoriented, I tried taking a shot at the ex-unicorn. My shot went wide, though, and ended up hitting one of the beams supporting the ceiling.

Gatling pony pointed in my direction. “es back there! Jackknife, flush ‘em out!”

The dynamite pony, who was apparently named Jackknife, gave the big one a look that said that he really just wanted it all to end, lit one of the sticks in his bandolier (using his hooves and a lighter, a detached part of me noted) and threw it in our direction.

“SHIT!” I scrambled to get behind one of the shelves near the back of the room.

Key, on the other hoof, had a different plan. As the dynamite neared him, he simply stared at it, halting it in a cloud of his magic.

As Key threw the dynamite back through the door, time seemed to slow to a crawl. There was the unmistakable crack of a gunshot, amplified a thousandfold by the enclosed space of the store. An instant later, I felt a sharp pain as a bullet shot straight through my left ear. Key slammed the door just after, the oddly thick door rattling in its decrepit hinges. There was an even louder blast that set my ears ringing. I looked over to where Key had hid. “What did you DO!?”

“Disoriented them!” he shouted, pushing the door open and running through to the other side.

I made my way to the door frame, poked my head around the corner, felt my mouth drop open, and immediately began coughing. A large hole had taken the place of the roof, raining debris down into the room below and creating an obscuring cloud of dust. Squinting, I could just make out the bodies of the red and brown Raiders crushed under a piece of rubble that covered where a cash register used to be. I took a few tentative steps into the room but stopped when I felt something uncomfortably warm and squishy underhoof. I slowly looked down and nearly tripped over myself when I saw what I was stepping in: in the place where my hoof just was sat the unmistakable shape of half of a pony’s skull, ripped asunder by the explosion. I felt my stomach churn, but managed to keep it under control.

Another shot rang out, this one whizzing past me and burying itself in the floor near my left rear hoof. I looked around wildly trying to find the source, but thanks to the dust, I had no idea where the shooter could have been.

*Somepony survived?*

It seemed that the Sisters were in a foul mood, as no sooner had I thought that than I heard the rubble shift, the unmistakable pop of a damaged spark battery identifying it as the Raider with the gatling laser.



*Oh you have got to be kidding me!*

I dove for cover behind the other side of the counter as a burst of magical energy nearly severed my head.

I poked my head up and judging by the direction of the bright red death beams, aimed my pistol at where I assumed him to be and fired.

*SPAK*

*BANG*

I winced. I had worked with too many Solaris-made devices to not know the sound of an exploding spark battery. There was another shot from somewhere in the room, and this time I could feel the bullet whiz through the hairs in my tail. The sniper must have been in withdrawal or something, because there was no way in my mind for someone to miss that much. Still, I took my blessings where I could get them, and returned fire.

*SPAK*

*SPAK*

*“AAAAGH!”*

I winced as I heard the disintegration magic of my beam pistol do its work, the scream of the dying pony seeming to continue long after the sizzling of the magic stopped.

*Just remember: it's either you or them.*

It was a bit of a dark thought, but focusing on that fact steeled my resolve and I tightened my grip on the mouthpiece.

Me or him.

Through the dust cloud, I was just barely able to see the last Raider fall. I trotted up to where Key was standing, supporting his weight with mine when I saw his slumping posture. “Hey, are you okay?” Then I noticed his leg. “Oh, Sisters! That...” I winced. I could almost put my hoof through the one hole that was in the middle, and one of the other beams must have clipped his leg, because there was a semicircular piece of it missing. “How much weight can you put on it?”

“Exactly none,” he said, slumping against me. “Fuck, why do you use those damn things?” He glanced at the rubble pile we were standing on. “Get me down.”

I lifted Key's injured leg and draped it over my back, helping him hobble down to the base of the pile. "Cause they don't kick like traditional guns. Easier on the neck." I looked around. The dead Raider Key had killed lay at our hooves, and the door that I assumed led to the street lay behind us. "Should we try and scavenge anything off these guys?"

"Do I look fucking ready to dig through the pockets of a few junkies?" he asked bitterly. Key closed his eyes, focusing. "Put me down. Put me down. I need to lay down for a bit," he added tersely.

My ears flattened themselves in response to the unicorn's tone. "Okay, okay." I laid him down as gently as I could. "I'm going to see what I can find. With any luck, at least one of them will have a healing potion."

Keeping an ear out for anything from my travel partner, I began the grim task of searching through the remains. Though I didn't find any healing potions, I did find a hooffull of Med-X syringes that looked unused. I stowed these in my saddlebags, attempting to hide the motion from Key.

*If he knows I have Med-X, he'll probably try and get me to let him have it, but his body hasn't yet recovered from the shock he gave it when he broke us out of the cages. I'll tell him later.*

I made my way back to Key. "Nothing, unless you want me to grab their-" An idea began to form in my mind. "Okay, Key, I think I have an idea. If you had some support for your leg, do you think you'd be able to walk?"

Key stared back at me, eyes unfocused and mouth agape. "W-What?" he breathed out sharply, "What is it?"

I balked at the sudden change in his well-being. "Key? A-are you alright?" I put a fetlock to his forehead and drew back almost immediately. He was burning up. I tapped his cheek lightly, trying to get his attention. "Hey! Key! What's happening? Talk to me!"

Key closed his eyes. "I'm fine," he whispered, "What did you see?"

"You're far from fine, Key. You're burning up! Just how many chems did you take!?"

"What happened?" he asked, opening his eyes again. As he focused on me, his eyes jittered back and forth as though he was dreaming. "Did you see her?"

"Who? Concentrate, Key! How. Many. Doses. Did. You. Take."

"Was she still pretty? She was so beautiful. She was always so beautiful," he said wistfully. Erratic Key turned to face the ceiling, a smile creeping across his face. "I miss her." He coughed a few times but otherwise maintained his peaceful gaze.

I sighed in irritation as I realized that I had been overreacting. Key was simply, to use common terminology, "tripping balls."

*Right. Common side-effect of Dash: elevated body temperature. If he's been using for as long as he claimed, then he's probably built up a tolerance to the drug, so he should probably be okay until he comes back down.*

Of course, more preferable would have been his not taking the chems in the first place, but seeing as that would have resulted in my catching a bad case of dead, I really didn't have any choice.

I considered the logistics of my next move. I needed the metal from the lead Raider's armor, but there was no way for me to cut it down where we were. "Okay, Key, I need to move you, so I'm going to be carrying you for a bit." I reached down, undid the remains of the metal armor, and put it on. It was extremely uncomfortable, but it let me carry both it and Key at the same time. I scooped him onto my back and headed to the back room once more, depositing him and the metal armor on the floor near the cabinet we had discovered our gear in. "I need to get some supplies. Be right back." That said, I trotted back to the cage room, looking for anything that I could use to perform some impromptu surgery.

I managed to find what I needed in the rubble, and trotted back to Key. He was still out of it, which was exactly what I needed for this to be surgery and not torture.

I fiddled with the settings on my beam pistol so it would produce a constant stream of energy while the trigger was pulled. I directed the beam to start cutting up the metal armor into smaller strips, which I then gave a longer burst on each end to fuse together, creating thick strips of metal.

The next part was the hardest for me, ethically speaking. I pulled one of the syringes of Med-X from my saddlebags. "Sorry Key, but I need to know that you're not going to feel this." I injected the needle into his side, waiting for him to fall asleep.

*First do no harm...*

*Well that's all about to be torn to pieces, isn't it?*

*Shut up. I'm doing this to save him.*

*Just saying...*

Once Key's breathing had stabilized, I pulled over the flamer I had found, and adjusted it so that I could use it as a heating flame. I pushed some of the rubble around to support the nozzle pointing towards the ceiling, and managed to find some other metal to use as a kind of grating. On top of this assembly, I placed the metal strips, turned on the heat, and waited.

Soon enough, the metal began to glow with its intense heat. From my saddlebag, I slipped on a set of thermal hoof coverings, designed to protect ponies working with, as a random example, heated metal. Taking the metal in my covered hooves, I placed two of them on either side of Key's hoof, the heat welding themselves to his hooves. I next threaded the pieces of metal through the hole in his leg, crossing them in the middle, and attached them to the foreleg using their own heat and secured them with a medical brace. The smell of burning flesh and hair mixed with the stench of melting keratin already permeating the room, creating a miasma of noxious odors that made me gag.

I held each of the plates in place and tested them to make sure they wouldn't come off. When I was sure my hoofwork would hold, I grabbed the pail of water I had retrieved, and poured it over the metal, steam filling the air as the impromptu spring brace cooled. My task complete, all that was left to do was wait for Key to wake up once more.

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Movement at my side caused me to jolt from the half-sleep I had been in for the last three hours. I unfolded myself from my sleeping position and stood, the joints in my legs and back popping in protest. I still felt horrible, but less so than when I had begun my vigil. "Hey," I said to Erratic Key. "How are you feeling?"

Key glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes. "What did you see?" he croaked.

One of my eyebrows raised itself in response. "Huh?" Then the wheels finished turning. "Oh, you mean in the memory orb?"

"Yeah."

I let out a breath through pursed lips. "Well, for one, I saw your niece. Like I said earlier, congratulations on that. Not many foals get to survive for twelve whole years these days. There were two other ponies; I imagine that Circuit is your brother. Oh yeah, and then there was that little matter of your Mark." I pointed to the broken key on my travelling companion's flank. "Cutie Marks don't change. Fact of life. Care to explain how you happen to have had a different Mark in the past?"

There was a resounding silence. After a tense minute, Key spoke: "Do you believe someone can be damned? Or that you can make up for the bad?"

That wasn't what I was expecting. I thought about that for a bit. "I'm... not entirely sure," I said slowly, choosing my words carefully. "Traditional Equestrian beliefs hold that the Sisters decide the ultimate fate of a pony when they die, but I personally doubt, based on their history of care for their subjects, that they would actually 'damn' anypony. But to answer your second question, I do believe that anyone can redeem themselves so long as they truly believe they are trying to make up for whatever it is that they have done. Is... is this about your changing Cutie Marks?"

"Maybe," Key said, closing his eyes. "Help me up?"

I reached out a hoof and hoisted Key from the floor. The doubt in his voice when he responded worried me more than a bit. "What do you mean, 'maybe?' How can you not know how your Cutie Mark changed?"

As I helped Erratic Key to his hooves, his attention was drawn to the brace on his left foreleg. "What happened?"

The second sudden topic change in as many minutes gave me pause. "Huh?" I looked to where Key was looking. "Oh. Well, you took quite the hit from that Raider's gatling laser, and you said that you couldn't put any weight on it. We need you mobile to survive, and that seemed like the best solution at the time. Hopefully it'll hold; I had to put it together from scrap."

"You made this?" Key asked, staring at the sizable hole in his leg. "I'm gonna need something to cover that up."

I shook my head. "Not really. Magical energy weapons cauterize wounds instantly, so the risk of infection is negligible." I took another look at his leg. "This is going to sound really weird, but it... doesn't look half bad. The holes give you an exotic kind of look."

This elicited a small smile from Key. "So what now?"

I thought about that for a bit. "Well, we should probably try and get back to the Residence for some R&R. Sisters know we deserve it by now. Barrel will probably want to know what we-" A sudden thought struck me, and I started searching through my saddlebags. "Shit!" I stamped the floor in anger. "The soil sample I took from the crater is gone!" I sighed. "Well, we're definitely not going back there any time soon." A frown crossed my face. "She probably would have liked it, too..."

"We can't just go back," Key said, "We haven't actually done anything."

"That's not exactly true. If you remember, Barrel asked us to scout out the crater to see what we could find there. We found death worms from Tartarus. Therefore, we're done there."

Key paused to think. "How many caps do we have on us?"

"Between the two of us? None. We are flat broke."

Key raised an eyebrow. "You're telling me a group of drugged-up cannibals didn't have a single cap on them? Have you searched the bodies?"

I made a face at the thought. "Well, I did a cursory search when I was scrounging for the materials for your leg spring, but I was really only concentrating on what I needed." With a resigned sigh, I added, "You should try and recover some more. I'll go see what I can find."

"You do that," Key said as he sat down.

I nodded and went about my unpleasant task.

*Good thing the brace held.*

*Yeah, we'd be boned without him.*

*I should probably see about getting some form of proper combat training when we get back to the Residence. Maybe that security mare could teach me a thing or two.*

*Yeah, like how to yell at ponies.*

*What?*

*You really think some two-bit security guard would be able to help us survive in the Wasteland? She was only slightly less green than we were!*

*Since when did I start referring to myself in the plural?*

*When you realized that you needed somepony to talk to without anyone else overhearing, but that's not the point.*

*No, this is kind of important here. If I conjured up a mental construct simply for the purpose of conversation... Dear Sisters, I'm going crazy.*

*No, you're just as sane as you've always been, Look, that's not the point here. The point is that one security pony is not going to do a whole lot for your combat skills. You need a teacher with experience; someone who's been out in the Wastes for a while. Someone who's seen it all.*

*I think I see what you're getting at here.*

*Exactly. We need Erratic Key. Try and bring it up casual conversation; he'd probably be more receptive to that idea that way.*

*Right.*

I blinked and found myself back where I started, my saddlebags slightly more full than they had been. "Okay," I took a quick double-check of my saddlebags. "Looks like all told, I found about fifty-eight caps, a gun in bad condition, five bullets, some rope, and some other junk that we can sell for a bit more."

Erratic Key nodded. "We need to find somewhere we can spend that, then. We're going to need food and water if we want to stay alive."

I sighed. "Other than the Residence and the PMRF, I have no idea where anyone is really settled down here. Pittspur was a big city; there could be a whole lot of little settlements, one big one, or none at all." I massaged my temple with a forehoof. "We should at least head in the direction of the Crossing as we look. Hopefully we'll find something before then."

"One last thing," Key said, staring at me. After an uncomfortably long pause, he finished his thought: "Make sure you have the Recollector. We'll be needing it."

I checked my saddlebags. Sure enough, the deformed tiara-looking device was still there. "Got it." I pulled Grief out and held it out to Key. "Here. You're better at hitting things than I, and you're unarmed. If you lead, you should probably be armed with more than your hooves."

Erratic Key glanced at the proffered weapon, distaste obvious in his eyes. "Yeah," he said, levitating the Raider weapon out of my grip, "I'll lead." He pushed open the front door, a slight limp in his step, and I followed. The street we stepped out on to was a far cry from the more open areas I was familiar with in Uptown. It was almost paved with wagons packed close together, the shells of skycarriages littering the tops every now and again. Additionally, the streets were narrower here: whereas in Uptown you could probably have had four carriages going along the same street, here it looked like it would have been difficult for two going in opposite directions. Erratic Key began walking down the sidewalk towards the instantly-recognizable Solaris building, and I hopped up onto the wreckage of a wagon to try and get a better view.

As far as I could see in both directions, the street was no less congested than where we were. As I stared at the burnt skeleton of a long-dead pony hitched to one of the wagons, I was hit with a sudden pain of loss. Sure, hearing about the mass panic of city evacuations was one thing, but witnessing the aftermath firsthoof... I shook my head.

*Focus, Disk.*

I noticed Erratic Key giving me a withering look. "What are you doing!?" he shouted

I took a step back at the outburst. "Sorry, I'm just trying to get a better look at things."

"You're gonna get yourself seen," he said rather calmly. "Everything in five blocks can see you from up there."

I bowed my head, my ears drooping in shame. "Sorry..."

Erratic Key shook his head. "Stars, Disk, you're supposed to be smart. Use your head next time!"

I was about to respond when [an unfamiliar tune](#) began playing from somewhere in the distance. My ears perked up at the sound, as did the rest of me. "What is that?"

"No fucking way," Key said, his ears swiveling to home in on the source of the sound. "Do some good while you're up there, and find that music."

I followed the tune to an intersection not far from where we had started, hopping from carriage to carriage as I went. Eventually, I found the source: a small blue metallic sphere, hovering at head height on a quartet of rapidly-fluttering wings. On the front was a speaker grille, which I assumed housed the source of the music. Oddly enough, there seemed to be a pair of friendly-looking eyes painted on either side. In the middle of each of these was the unmistakable lens of a camera.

I turned to Erratic Key, an eyebrow raised in confusion. "What...?" was all I could think to say.

Erratic Key, on the other hoof, had no such reservations. "Watcher!" he yelled, striding right up to the spritebot. "Watcher! Answer me!"

I could only stare at my travelling companion, sure that he had lost his mind. However, I was more than slightly surprised when the pleasant marching music suddenly cut out.

"Oh, you made it." The voice was tinny, distant, and unmistakably not synthesized.

"Hold on a second!" I interjected, poking Erratic Key in the side. "What's going on here? Who is this?"

"Shut it, Disk." Key said curtly before turning his attention back to the 'bot. "You didn't tell me that the fucking sky bled radiation here!" he pointed an accusatory hoof at the metal ball. "What the fuck!?"



“Agh!” There was the sound of something heavy hitting something else. “I knew I forgot something! Sorry; I just ha-... never mind. It slipped my mind.” The flittering robot turned to face me. “I see you’ve managed to make a friend. One of the locals, I assume?”

I nodded and held out a forehoof before realizing that the robot had no way to return the gesture and dropped it. “Hi, I’m Data Disk. PMRF Technician.” I waved my previously-extended forehoof at the spritebot. “Who are you? I don’t think we’ve met.”

The ‘bot bobbed in place. “No, we haven’t. Call me Watcher.” It turned back to Erratic Key. “I assume you have a reason for calling me.”

“How about sending me here, to start with,” Key said, glaring at the ball. “Some warning of what I was getting into would have been nice. A little hint that death falls from the sky, that robed maniacs will call for your death, anything!”

There was a staticky sound as Watcher inhaled sharply. “Robed maniacs? Did you happen to- Up. Hold on.” There was a pop, and the music returned for a few seconds before it snapped back off again. “Sorry about that. Uh, did you happen to catch any of their names?”

“They talked about the Shaper. It was only thing they mentioned at all.”

“Oh.” The finality of the statement caused lead weights to assert themselves in my stomach. “Oh, that’s not good.” There was the sound of some paper being shuffled around. “Uh... from what I’ve been able to gather, the Shaper is somepony who lives in the Downtown area of Pittspur, and his gang, the Shaper’s Hoof, are some serious bad news. From what I can tell, he’s basically trying to conquer the entire city, and his generals, the Shaper’s Six, are the ones who do it for him. I think he sees himself as some sort of competitor to Red Eye or something.” More static as Watcher sighed. “In any case, as I shouldn’t have to say, if they’re after you, be on your guard. These guys are good. I mean, they’re no Reapers, but then again, the Hoof is the exception to everything.”

“Good how?” Key asked.

“Well, that’s the thing. From all accounts, anyone who goes up against them ends up disappearing. Then some time later, it varies from case to case, they just... reappear as if nothing happened. I’ve tried to ask the victims about it, but none of them remember anything, despite several of them having lost their family and friends to the Shaper’s Hoof.” An odd scratching sound came from the speaker. “I can’t really give you any explanation for it. My best guess is that they use some kind of mind magic, but the research the MAS did on the topic never turned up any evidence that such a thing could be practical, especially not with the frequency they seem to be using it.”

“They have a frequency? You mean for communication?”

The small 'bot wiggled in the air. "No. I mean these disappearances happen pretty often. The MAS hypothesized that any major mind-altering magic would take the caster quite some time to recover from. Not only would she have to let her magic recharge, but she would have to come into mental contact with parts of the other pony's psyche. That's not something you would be able to just shake off."

Erratic Key tapped his chin. "So these guys have a habit of kidnapping, brainwashing and then releasing those they attack? Meaning they take victims alive." He frowned. "Fine. Where can I find them?"

The 'bot wobbled a bit in what I imagined was its version of a shrug. "I don't know. All I know is that most of the encounters seem to take place around the area north of the Stable." There was a distant beeping from the speaker. "Oh nuts. Gotta go. Good luck!" With a pop, the music returned, and the robot resumed its aimless wandering.

I turned to Erratic Key. "What in the hypothetical fuck was that!?"

"Useful." he said, a thoughtful look on his face. "We should find somewhere to hunker down. We need food, water, sleep. More information too."

"No, really," I moved so I was almost invading Erratic Key's personal space. "Who was that? He seemed to know you. There's no way that's not important."

He shook his head. "Watcher's the reason I'm here. He told me about what was happening and sent me to help fix it, okay?"

I snorted in annoyance. "That's not what I meant. From the sound of things, Watcher seems to be pretty well-connected. Who is he?"

Key just shrugged. "Hell if I know. He's a voice inside the spritebots. That's it. That's all I know."

My eyebrow made its way to the top of my face again. "Really?"

He rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Yes, Disk. I don't know anything about the guy."

I sighed. "Fine. But this isn't over. When we have the time, you're going to tell me everything. And I mean everything." I gave a pointed look at the sack of memory orbs slung across my companion's back. "Like you said, we need someplace to make camp." I gestured to a store across the street, a faded picture of a grinning gryphon adorning its windows. "Does that look any good to you?" Memories of the last time I declared a place "safe" bubbled to the top of my mind.

"Nothing looks good to me," Key responded, eyeing the store. "But it seems fine enough."

I sighed. Pretty much anything would beat being exposed on the streets, especially if it decided to start raining again. Walking ahead of Erratic Key, I nudged open the shop's door, on edge in case of attack. When a threat failed to materialize from the dim interior, I stepped fully inside, and then promptly wished I hadn't. I covered my snout with a forehoof as I let Key in behind me, the stench of dead things permeating the air and soaking into my coat. "Ugh, I should have guessed. A gryphon market." I turned back to my travelling companion. "Can we—"

I was interrupted by the sound of the storm alert siren.

I lowered my head in defeat. "Never mind..." I muttered. I turned to survey the store. It was dim, but not overly so. Most of the floor was dominated by row after row of shelves, spaced just wide enough that a pony with saddlebags (or a gryphon, as would have been more likely) would have been able to squeeze through without knocking anything off the shelves. The shelves themselves were surprisingly still in a mostly-upright position, their goods either spilled to the floor or looted long ago. On the far side of the shop sat a low counter, and it was from there that the stench of meat most strongly emanated. "If we're lucky, there might be some wood somewhere we can use to make a platform on top of one of those downed shelves. Would you give me a hoof checking it out?"

"No," Key said from behind me. "Find somewhere on the floor and make it yours," he said as he walked past me and proceeded to do just that.

I pursed my lips. Following Key would mean getting closer to what I refused to acknowledge was the kitchen, but I had little choice. A light bulb flickered to life in my head as I began walking, and I stopped not two steps after I had started. Using one of the dead Raider's pistols, a bullet, and some rope, I was able to put together a crude "trap" for the front door. Feeling rather pleased with myself, I trotted over to where Key was rummaging through the sack of memory orbs. "I've set it up so that if anyone opens the door, the gun will go off. It probably won't kill them, but the noise should give us enough warning to not die immediately."

"Sure thing, Disk," Key croaked out from his prone position. "You've got some bandages in that sack of yours?"

I frowned. "No, sorry. Is your leg not hurting any less?"

"I'd just prefer not to have a gaping hole in my body exposed to air," Key said bitterly. He sighed as he pulled a memory orb from his sack. "I'm gonna...be in here for a bit."

I nodded. "Right. I'll go see if I can find anything edible over there." I gestured towards the shelves. "If it's any help, the hole should be completely scarred over, what with the heat and the,

uh...” I realized that I was just digging myself deeper. “Like I said, over there.” I made my way to the indicated area and started rummaging.

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It was an hour later that Key finally stirred from his memory orb-induced trance. I pushed a half-can of water and a small box of uncooked noodles in front of him. “Welcome back. The water’s condensate from the ceiling, so it should be mostly rad-free. I can’t say the same for the noodles, though. I, uh, did what I could for food and stuff, and that’s pretty much all I could find that we can eat. Everything else is either spoiled or gryphon food.”

Key tore open the dry noodles, chomping on them ravenously. “So,” he said through a full mouth, “which way is the Stable?”

I pulled out my map that had miraculously survived the Raiders in the grocery store.



It took me a bit to find where I assumed we were. “Looks like we’re here, right on the ‘D’ in ‘danger,’ so the Stable is southeast of us.” I tapped one of the thicker lines that crossed most of the map. “I think that used to be a highway, which I’m guessing is a good place to get shot by Raiders or something. From what I’ve heard they seem to like being around major Pre-War areas.”

“Well, we should probably get a little better equipped before we head to the Stable.” Key sipped at his water as he looked over the map. “Let’s head there,” he said, tapping at Solaris HQ. “See if we can’t find anything of use. You said they made weird tech right?”

I drew a breath through clenched teeth. "Well... no. Not really. Kinda. They *tried* to make more conventional things, but the only success they ever saw was their landmine design. That said, we *would* probably find something of use there. I mean, no guarantees, but it's better than nothing."

"Any company that created a landmine and was a major competitor of Stable-Tec has to have something of use. I don't know about taking the major highway though."

I nodded. "I'm assuming that's where we'd be most likely to get attacked." I thought for a bit, and then added, "And there's probably not much to take cover behind. Do you have any suggestion as to how we get there, then?"

"Try and move through any and all back streets available. We should also try to keep from entering any buildings that we don't have to."

"Well alright then," I said as I folded up the map again. "Sounds like we have a plan." The rain continued to pound its rhythm into the roof as I packed it away. As I did so, my body reminded me that I had had an exhausting day as all the aches and pains that I was able to ignore for the last hour or so came back to me. "Ugh. What a day. Kidnapped and almost eaten by Raiders, mauled by other Raiders, and now stuck in a store reeking of death. Oh yeah, and it's raining." I sighed. "So, since we're not really going to be doing anything else in the near future, why don't you tell me a bit about yourself, Key?" I folded my legs under me and lied down.

"You get one question," Erratic Key said with a sigh, lying down across from me. "You saved my life and I suppose you've earned at least that."

I smiled slightly. Most of the ponies I had treated in the past didn't really acknowledge my help, but when they did, it felt good. "Well, first of all, you could come clean about your Cutie Mar-" I leaned back as Erratic Key glared daggers at me. "...or I could ask something else." I tapped my chin in thought. "I remember seeing the inside of some sort of shack in your memory orb, but I didn't get to see where it actually was. So where were you when that all happened?"

"After I left Tenpony, I started to move around a pretty good bit. I found a group. Friends. An actual life," Key looked to the side as if he was ashamed to admit this. "Precise location, I couldn't tell you. Somewhere southeast of Tenpony. We found a group of houses. More shacks really. Some closed off suburb we decided might work. So we decided to stay there. It worked for a while. Things happened as they tend to do."

I raised an eyebrow. "What kind of things?"

"People died. *Friends* died. Sometimes I wonder if I did. Either way, things fell apart after a while, and I kept moving on my own."

“Oh.” My ears drooped in sadness, and I reached over to pat Erratic Key on the back. “I’m sorry. That must have been hard. How did you keep yourself together?”

“I did what I had to. Killed, stole, just about anything I needed to do to survive. I guess at one point you could have even called me a Raider.”

I nodded as I considered this morsel of information. It made sense once I started thinking about it. Erratic Key was violent, addicted to drugs, had no problems killing people, and had absolutely no sense of decorum, at least as far as I could tell. He was a Raider alright, just one that hadn’t decided to kill me yet. Despite this, I didn’t really feel in too much danger lying next to him. I mentally smirked as I realized something. “I guess that was more than one question, huh?”

“Your turn.” Key faced me once more as he spoke, his voice becoming stronger. “How did you first join the Followers?”

I smiled. Luckily for me, this was not an unhappy memory. “Well, I was born into them, to be quite honest. My parents, Jury Rig and Hip Flask, had been Followers for a large part of their lives. I never really thought to ask how or why they joined, really.” I frowned. “Unfortunately, they died from the Pittspur Pox before we had completed the treatment for its symptoms.” Key looked back down to the ground. “Your turn, I guess.”

I furrowed my brow in thought. I would have loved to ask about his Cutie Mark, but that topic was apparently off-limits. “How did you find Watcher? Or did he find you?”

“Watcher found me initially. Said there was something I could actually do out here. I guess really he gave me a *reason* to live. I hadn’t had something to strive for in a long time, and it felt good to be doing something, to have something to work towards.” Key paused for a second. “Tart was the last one,” he said with glimmer of a smile.

I frowned as the implication of his words hit. “Was?”

“She wasn’t my niece. Not actually. She just liked to call me uncle. Her parents were my best friends, so really I was more of a godfather I suppose.” Another pause. “And yeah. Was.”

Though I had only had a short glimpse at the filly, the words still hurt like a kick to the stomach. I shook my head. “Sisters...” I said through my teeth, glancing towards the ceiling. “The Wasteland is bad enough, but don’t you think you could at least try and protect the kids? Huh? Is that too much to ask?”

“Yeah,” Key said, his voice becoming hollow. “You always try to save the kids.”

I looked back and forth between my downcast companion and the spot on the ceiling I had been addressing. "I- what? No, I was talking- never mind. Did... oh, Sisters, I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to insinuate... argh!" I hit my head against the floorboards. "Just ignore me..."

"It's alright Disk. I know what you meant."

"Sorry, sometimes I'm just really bad at conversation." I rubbed my forehead with a pastern where I had hit it on the floor. "Ow. And that didn't help." I sighed. "I just wish sometimes that none of this had ever happened, you know? Littlehorn, the megaspells, heck, even the initial discovery of coal! I would be fine not existing if it meant knowing that the world was a better place." I heaved a sigh. "But that's not the way things work, I know. And so life goes on, I guess." I laid my head on the ground. "Ugh. Sometimes I wish I could just escape it all, even for a bit..."

"You can't wish for things to have not happened," Key said. "Ultimately, everything that has ever happened has had some form of effect on you. The war, the deaths, even the existence of the plague, has come together to produce who you are right now. You have to be content with what's happened in the world, because that means being content with yourself. And if you'd rather just not be here, there are plenty of people out there who will oblige you."

I shifted, trying to make the spot of floor I was inhabiting slightly comfortable. "I didn't mean it like *that*, Sisters no! I just mean never having been born in the first place. Not me, my parents, their parents, all the way back to when it could all just be better." I sighed. "But like I said, only sometimes. Most of the time, I'm glad knowing I can at least try and make the world a better place, cliché as that sounds. Even if it just means bandaging up this Wastelander or giving that one her Pox treatment..." Despite my earlier melancholy, a smile crossed my face. "When you get that smile, even if it's not really there, even if they're thinking it... that's the best thing ever. That's what I live for."

"And do you think coming out here was the best way to do that?"

I closed my eyes in thought. "If we can get that cure out to the whole of Pittspur, then I think that whatever hell I'll have gone through to do so will have been worth it."

"The whole of Pittspurr," Key glanced out the window. "You don't think that'll have some sort of backlash?"

I raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

"Well, we've already established that there's a mad dictator out here. Most of the area is covered in bandits and Raiders, none of which have any idea they're slowly dying or whatever it is this disease does." He returned his attention to me. "What do you think will happen when all

those stand-up citizens get word that they're all dying and their only cure is one building filled with less than a dozen doctors?"

"We'd have a massive raid on our hooves. I know. It's one of the other problems we're trying to solve. Dispersal of the cure has to be simple, but at the same time we need to make sure that everyone can get it without having to rush the PMRF." I sighed. "We do have a logistics team, well, more just anyone who can spare the time, and they're trying to figure out just how to do that." I shook my head sadly. "Last I heard, they thought out best bet would be to somehow make a sort of gas and get it to cover the whole city, kinda like some kind of anti-Pox. I have no idea how they thought that would."

Key put up a forehoof, stopping me. "I don't think the rabble is what you'll have to deal with. It's their leader."

I sighed again. "You mean this Shaper guy? Yeah, I'm concerned about him. I mean, I could understand if he was just some other Raider boss, but from what Watcher said, it sounds like he's planning something. And then there's those ponies we saw back at the Residence. An army of radiation-proof Raiders would mean an absolute nightmare."

"You have to think about if he finds out. If anyone in any form of power finds out. Holding the sole cure of a disease hostage in exchange for service is an excellent recruitment method."

I nodded. "Which is why, like I said back at the PMRF, the cure is super top secret. We know the risks we're taking by keeping it as such, but we're pretty sure the benefits outweigh the risks here."

"There you go with that again," Key said. "I feel like you're going to regret those words one day, Disk. Even after you save the world you still have to live with yourself."

I was about to respond when the pounding sound of the rain began to slacken, tapering off to a light drizzle and then finally stopping altogether in only a few moments. I shook my head.

"Pittspur weather. Just can't make up its mind, can it?"

"We should wait a while before heading out. Let the water clear out of the streets and make sure the rain won't come back immediately. Then we should get moving."

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The trip to Solaris, in comparison to the hell we had just been through, was uneventful. There were a hooffull of Raider encampments scattered across the way, but we managed to sneak by most of them without incident.

Most of them.



"Fuck this fucking piece of shit," Key grumped, shaking bits of Raider off the head of a now-broken Grief. "Just for once, I'd like to have a decent weapon. Maybe one of those Zebrian swords. I've heard they cut through ponies like a sword through a pony."

I shook my head, sighing at Erratic Key's analogy. "Really? As opposed to what?"

*click*

There as a tingling around my foreleg as I tried to continue walking, but Erratic Key's magic held my hoof in place.

"Disk," Key said, his voice low and calm, "I need you to stay right where you are. Okay? Just... tell you what, close your eyes."

"Key? What... what's going on?" I asked, panic creeping into my voice. I looked down, and the situation crystallized. Right under my hoof was a landmine.

I felt the bottom of my stomach drop out as Key's telekinetic grip tightened.

"Key, please tell me you know how to get me out of this!" More panic. I was trying not to, but when you're one twitch away from death, it's difficult not to.

"Okay, okay. Data Disk, the first thing I'm gonna need is for you to trust me." Key began walking towards me, his head sweeping the area around us. "Can you do that? I need you to think I can get you out of this and calm down. Everything is going to be just fine."

I took a deep breath, then another. "Okay, I- I think I can do that. What do I do?"

"Close your eyes." Key was only a foot away from me now.

"Why?"

"Disk," he said, leaning a little closer. "Trust me."

I took a deep breath. Just yesterday, Key ended up killing an entire building's worth of Raiders and taking a whole mess of chems after asking me to do the same thing.

I closed my eyes, expecting the worst.

"Okay I'm gonna look at the landmine." Key's voice responded from somewhere near my hooves. "I want you to slightly relax your hoof for me, Disk."

"The one you're still holding down?"

"Yeah, that one. Just take a deep breath, and let your leg go limp. Don't move it, just relax."

I nodded, doing as was asked.

"Good. Now, I'm going to move your hoof."

My eyes shot open. "You what!?"

"Step one, Disk," Key said more harshly, forcing my hoof down more. "Now close your eyes and shut up. Do you trust me or not?"

"Yeah, I just..." I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes again. "Never mind." I relaxed my leg once more.

"Good," Key replied with a relieved sigh. "I'm going to move your leg. Slightly. I need to see precisely what I'm working with."

I felt the pressure on my hoof change and felt my hoof begin to slide ever so slowly across the top of the mine.

"So do you still think...oh what was her name? Melody was it? That mare from back home you had the hots for. She worth all this?"

Key's non sequitur took me for a loop. "Huh? Healing Medley? I don't really- well, that is- I haven't given it any thought, actually. I don't think it's a case of whether or not she likes me anymore. I think it's more that it's what needs to be done. Besides," I added as an afterthought, "After meeting some of the ponies at the Residence, Medley doesn't seem all that attractive."

"You met her once, Disk. You ready to move one from someone I assume you've known for years? Is she worth all of this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, my face flushing.

"Don't play the dipshit with me, Disk. You spent less than three hours in the same room with a barkeeper who sent both of us to a near death experience."

"W-well *yeah*, but that doesn't mean I suddenly have a crush on her or anything." I rolled my (still-closed) eyes. "That would just be *silly*."

"You shouldn't," Key said, a hint of venom in his voice. "Relationships take time. You don't meet someone and fall for them." His voice began to fall, becoming more and more quiet as he

spoke. "You spend time with them, get to know them, find things in common and a reason to want to be with them. That's what evolves, Disk. None of that true love, love at first sight shit. Don't kid yourself."

Something in his voice made me switch trains of thought. "Are you okay, Key?"

"No," he replied flatly.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm tired," Erratic Key said. "I've done a lot. A whole lot." He paused for a moment. "What's the worst thing you've ever done, Disk?"

I furrowed my brow, trying to keep my eyes closed. "It's probably going to sound petty in your experience, but I killed some ponies." I drooped my head. "I know you said to not let it become a big deal, but I still feel bad about it."

"Me too," He replied softly. After a short pause, Key let out a quiet sigh. "Fine. Her name was Ore Vein."

"Wait, you mean the mare from the orb? The one married to Circuit?"

"She wasn't always. Me and Circuit met her at the same time. We were best friends then. Both of us wanted her as soon as we met her. She, of course, got to choose in the end."

"What happened?"

"She died. Along with...she was..." Key sighed, and I could almost feel the emotion behind it. He didn't want to talk about this. "She died."

My morbid curiosity was pushing me to ask more, but I couldn't think of any delicate way to broach the subject. "I'm so sorry." was all I could think of to say.

"Don't be," Key said, his voice strengthening slightly. "People die when they act stupid. Sometimes they die when the people they're with act stupid. People die, people stay unhappy, and people keep trying to dig and find their way into something that'll make them less miserable. It's the only thing that keeps us going."

"People don't have to stay unhappy forever, though. If you look, you can always find something to brighten your life, whether it's another person, a thing, or even an ideal to strive for." I sighed. "That's what I want more than anything: to let the people of the Wasteland know that it's going to get better. That there *is* hope, no matter what you think."

"I know, Disk. But it's easier said than believed. What happens when you've searched for years? When after so long you've found nothing? You can only live so long on the hope of finding something to believe in. When do you break? How long before you start to doubt?"

I frowned. "You don't. You take what you have and you make the best of it. You keep going, and you never stop looking for that thing that makes everything worthwhile, because it *is* out there. It might take time to find, sure, but you'll find it eventually."

"You can preach all you want, Disk. But you'll doubt that one day. And that's when it'll start to get hard." Erratic Key paused for a moment. "It's a Solaris make."

It took me a moment to figure out what Key's sudden topic shift meant. "Uh... is that bad?"

"You know them better than I do. From what I can tell it's a standard shrapnel detonation, pressure activated. No sign of a beeper though. Smart design. The explosion will likely fire itself almost straight up. Maximum damage to the limb and the organ-toting underbelly of the dipshit who steps on it. No offense."

"None taken." I felt myself start to sweat again. "What do we do?"

"Well while you were so busy talking about whether or not coming out here was a good idea and focusing on the snippets of my past, I've already removed it."

I opened my eyes. Floating in front of me in a pale blue aura of magic was a landmine. I stumbled back several steps. "What the hell!?"

"You can't get distracted by my existential bullshit, Disk." Key floated the landmine in front of his face to get a better look at it. "Though I suppose in this situation it was rather helpful. Didn't even notice me let go of your leg, did you?" he said, his attention focused more on the landmine than me..

"No, no I didn't. What are you doing?"

"Checking out a landmine, what the hell does it look I'm doing?"

"But why?" I shook my head. "Never mind. We're getting close to Solaris." I gestured into the distance at the building. "There's probably going to be more where those came from, as well as who-knows-what-else. How are we supposed to get there without getting blown up?"

"Watch your damn step is how," Key said, glowering. "Take it slow and don't step anywhere you haven't looked yet." He turned back to the landmine. "Now, what to do with you?"

"Maybe you should keep it, just in case."

“You want me to walk around with an active landmine that’ll detonate as soon as I let it go?” He asked, floating the mine to rest in the air beside him. He glanced over to the landmine, a pensive look on his face.

I balked. “Uh... Key? What are you doing?”

“What? Oh, nothing,” Key rolled his eyes “Stupid idea really. Interesting, but really stupid.”

“Well then if you’re not going to keep it, then don’t just *hold* it there, for Sisters’ sakes! *Do* something with it!”

“Stars, call down Disk.” Key placed the landmine down on the ground. “Find me a rock or something will you?”

I picked up a rock and hoofed it to the unicorn, slightly confused. “What are you going to do?”

“Keep this thing from blowing up as to not attract any attention,” He floated the rock over to the mine, lowering it ever so carefully,

I held my breath as the rock touched the top of the mine, but when it failed to explode, I let out a relieved sigh. I glanced again at the tall building not five blocks away from us, determination in my mind.

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After that, the rest of the trip was smooth sailing, as far as getting shot and nearly blown up were concerned, and it wasn’t long before we reached the Solaris building.

Even in the dim evening light, it was impressive: forty stories of metal beams outlined where the once-proud building stood, its glass exterior melted by the megaspell detonation. The remaining shell painted an eerie picture: with no walls to protect it, the inside of the building had been completely obliterated, leaving a wireframe portrait of a monolith. Before us stood what once used to be an entrance, the glass doors melted into a slick-looking glaze that had been shattered and scattered by hopeful looters. The ground floor was massive, easily two hundred feet to a side. In the middle of the debris scattered around the area sat a massive lump of once-melted glass.

Watching where I stepped, I began to carefully make my way towards it, curious as to what could be trapped underneath.

“Well,” Key said, “That *is* a big pile of shit. Can’t believe any of it is still standing.”

I continued walking, but looked back to talk to Key. "Say what you will, I'm impressed that the internal structure is still standing. Given the proximity to the crater-" I was interrupted when my hoof tapped something hard. I turned around and nearly jumped out of my skin.

There in front of me sat a group of ponies crowded around a desk, looks of absolute terror on their half-melted faces, perfectly preserved like an insect in amber. I put a hoof to my chest, heart racing. "Oh Sisters, that is *horrible!*"

It was then that I noticed the small hole in the glass. It was roughly hoof-sized, and formed a tunnel straight to the desk where the foremost mare sat. Despite my revulsion, I stepped forward once more to take a closer look. The hole was unnaturally smooth, almost like the glass had been re-melted as the hole had been cut. But what did this mare have that someone wanted? And why would they take it?

My mind buzzing with questions, I returned to Erratic Key. "It looks like that mare over there had something with her when she died, but someone took it. Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"People frozen solid in their final dying states as the horrors of war and all reality come crashing to the surface, resulting in a museum of permanently-fixed terror? Nope. This is going to be a wonderful experience isn't it?" Key asked no one in particular. "How the hell would you take something out of this without shattering it to bits anyway?"

I tapped my chin thoughtfully. "I suppose that if you had a laser of the right frequency, and you were very careful, you might be able to melt the glass. That would explain the hole's smoothness. But what did she have? It couldn't have been very big; the hole was barely hoof-sized." A thought struck me. "Can I see one of your memory orbs?"

"No," Key said, walking forward. "But I see where you're going." He pulled out a memory orb as he approached the hole. Sure enough, it was roughly the same the size.

"Hrm..." I once again tapped my chin. "So this mare knew or remembered something important enough to warrant digging her memory orb out of three feet of glass. Assuming that it was her memory in the first place. I wonder what-"

I was interrupted by a loud rumble from somewhere beneath my hooves. "Did you hear that?"

"If everything up above melted into glass what do you think happened to this place's basement?" Key said, putting the memory orb away.

"I don't know, but I have a feeling we're going to find out."

No Kill Like It - Get a 25x kill combo  
Contact - Find Watcher in Pittspur  
Somepony Set Up Us The Bomb - Defuse 50 explosive traps

Clockwise notes:

Erratic Key played by Galvin Starlight.

Proofread by Galvin Starlight and Doctor Ham.

As per usual, a massive thanks to Galvin Starlight, without whom this would not be possible. If you liked this story, swing by [/r/FOEwriters](#) and [/r/falloutequestria](#) to check out some other cool stories (and some cool people)!