

////==Chapter 2: Discrepancy in the Past==\\\\

I stared at the impossible sight before me, my jaw hanging slack. I thought I was knowledgeable about the ways of the world, or at least the nonviolent parts of it, but this, however, was so far out of my league that I couldn't even see the stadium walls. I mean, ponies surviving more than a minute in the radioactive hell that was Pittspur rain?

I turned to Erratic Key. "We are in so deep here. I have no friggin' idea how those ponies could even have been *alive*, much less what they were talking about. Who's 'the Shaper?' What's the 'light's catalyst?'" I moaned, sinking down to the floor and putting my forehooves over my head. "I knew leaving the PMRF was a bad idea..."

He took a deep breath. "Either way, we should definitely look into those guys. If they've got a way to survive out in fuckin' radioactive rain, I want to know what it is." And then came the stinger: "Besides, if you want any piece of Melody's flank you need that cure. I still think that you should hook up with Barrel though."

I felt my face flush once again. "Hey! Who I happen to be attracted to is none of your business!" I got to my hooves, Key's mention of the strange ponies' ability tickling something in the back of my head. "I want to know how they survived as well. Knowledge like that could save innumerable lives, not to mention the boon it could provide for Pittspur's growth." I felt my attention begin to drift. "Imagine it now: Hundreds, no *thousands* of people able to work in any kind of weather, radioactive or not." I sighed. "That would be amazing..."

"Aaaaaaand you're boring me, Disk," Erratic Key interrupted. "Though I have to admit that would be very useful for moving around the city. Still don't understand why anyone would actually want to stay here." I looked back to him as he trotted closer. "How long do you think the rain will keep up? We need to get out of here as soon as possible."

I shrugged. "Pittspur weather tends to be really temperamental. Could be anywhere from five minutes to five hours." As if on queue, the rain slackened, becoming a drizzle. "Like I said, temperamental."

Erratic Key gave me a half-suspicious look. "Well isn't that convenient. We should make sure we've got everything we need before we leave. If you need to say goodbye to anyone," He raised an eyebrow, inclining his head towards me. "Anyone at all.... now would be the time. Once the rain's gone, we'll need to get moving. We'll want to stay under shelter for as long as we can in case the rain returns. Not to mention the ground's still probably a bit covered in radioactive water.."

I nodded. "Yeah, the sooner we get moving on this, the better." I glanced around. "I'm going to, uh... yeah. I'll be... over there." I gestured behind myself as I headed back to Barrel's bar. As I was walking, I began to think about what Key had been saying. Yeah, I had been crushing on

Healing Medley for the longest time, but what did I really have in common with her? We were both Followers, but that was about it. She was medically-trained, and I worked with machines. On the other hoof, I had only just met Barrel, but something about her made me want to get to know her better. What did we even have in common? I thought for a bit. As far as I could tell, next to nothing. I stopped walking. Then again, she seemed like a sweet mare, unlike Medley, who had the temper of sandpaper. I sighed. *Confound these ponies! They drive me to introspection!* I began walking again, slightly befuddled with myself.

I entered the bar and sat in the seat I had occupied previously. Barrel was there, looking straight at me. "Hey, Barrel. How's it going?"

"Oh, are you back already?" Barrel asked, a smile springing to her face. "I thought you two had already left."

"Well, we were, but then we had a rather interesting encounter." I filled Barrel in about the ponies in the rain. "Neither Key nor I have any idea how they weren't dead. We're planning to try and investigate. I don't suppose you have any leads?"

"No idea," Barrel said, her eyes beginning to glaze over as she became lost in thought, an all-too-familiar state for me. "Just think of what we could do if we could go outside whenever we wanted! We could do so much more and even spread out. I could get more customers and learn so much more!" Barrel began hopping back and forth from hoof to hoof, giddy with anticipation.

"I know, right? I said as much to Key, but he didn't seem to care." *Huh. maybe we have more in common than I thought.*

"Do you think you could find out what let them stay out in the rain like that?" Barrel asked, turning to face me. Her eyes were practically glowing with a foal-like glee as her forehooves came to rest on mine.

I patted one of her hooves with mine. "I don't know, Barrel, but we'll sure as heck will try." I stared off into the mid-distance, my mind percolating with ideas. "We'll try."

"Well that's all any of us can really do isn't it?" Barrel asked with a smile, placing her hooves back on the ground. "So when exactly are you boys planning on heading out?"

"Tomorrow. Hopefully by then the rain will have stopped all together. I don't suppose you have any advice as to what to be on the lookout for once we're in Downtown?"

"The rain's the most dangerous thing that anyone here knows about," Barrel said. "If you hear the siren, find shelter and try to hunker down. One of the worst things that can happen is getting into a cover war, with rain already pouring down. Not many ponies know at all what it's like in the middle of the city, but every once in awhile we get people coming in talking about some of the

strangest things. Like, monsters made out of a whole bunch of different ponies! Most of the people we get in saying that are little off their rocker, but you never know. Aside from that, I've never actually been in the inner city myself, so I'm afraid you boys are on your own."

I pursed my lips. That didn't exactly sound encouraging. "Well, thanks a lot. Hopefully we'll make it back in one piece." I forced a grin, but I'm sure the barmare didn't believe it. "I guess I'll see you in the morning, then."

As I made my way back to the room, the sense of dread I had felt when receiving Barrel's information increased as I was able to think over it, and the more I thought about it, the more it became clear that Erratic Key and I, or at least just me, had very little chance of surviving this little excursion. The thought made my stomach churn.

When I at last made my way back to the room, I found Erratic Key asleep on the bed. I sighed. *You snooze, you lose, Disk. Or not snooze, I guess.* I made my way to the couch and soon found myself drifting off to sleep in spite of my overactive mind.

////=====////

I opened my eyes. I was no longer in the Residence. My surroundings were unfamiliar to me: a flat plane of concrete as far as I could see, yet I knew somehow that I was still in Pittspur. My saddlebags were nowhere to be found, and I couldn't find my beam pistol.

"Well, well, well," said Healing Medley. "What do we have here? The little birdie trying to leave the nest?"

I stepped back. She was speaking Equestrian, and I heard her, but she wasn't making sense. I could tell that whatever she was saying was not friendly.

The pink mare stepped forward, brandishing a pair of shears in her mouth. "Come on, little birdie. We need to give you a little trim."

I leapt backwards, my wings helping me distance myself from the once-friendly pony. "Stay back!" I shouted. "I know ponies!"

A dry chuckle from behind me made me turn. Lying on the ground was Erratic Key, or at least what used to be him. He was barely recognizable, his body mutilated by slashing wounds and his horn a mere stump. Only his Cutie Mark was intact, the broken key seeming to glint in the invisible sunlight. Medley advanced towards me undeterred, the blood on the shears in her mouth glinting ominously. "Do you really?" she asked, her voice low, almost sultry. She slashed her head forwards in a sudden strike, and the blade bit deep into my neck.

////=====////

My eyes shot open and my chest was heaving as I drew panicked breaths. I was still in the Residence; the cloud-filtered moonlight reaffirmed that. I closed my eyes once more and tried to will myself to calm down. Eventually, though I didn't notice it, I fell asleep again.

I don't remember what I dreamed about.

////===////

It was on our way to The Crossing when it happened. Erratic Key and I were just walking down the street, minding our own business, when two Raiders started towards us. The first was a large mare with a coat the color of sour milk in heavy metal barding. I could see by the way she was jittering that she was riding high on the wings of Dash. Probably some other chems as well, knowing the Raiders. The other one was a more normal-sized stallion, his coat an emerald green, mottled by patches of exposed skin. I had seen this before: a combination of Dash, Buck, and radiation. Probably only had a week before he shed everything but his Cutie Mark.

The mare stepped forward. "Well well well, lookie what we got here. A motherfuckin' unicorn. He look like th' one we was talked about, Jive?"

The smaller one squinted his head at Key. "Hey, yeah. But ain't we supposed to not kill 'im? Th' Speaker said-"

He was cut off by a vicious backhoof from the armored mare. "Look Jive, I'm goin' to be comin' down soon, and I'll be damned if I let these fuckers get away. They're the ones what killed th' scout party, remember?"

I looked worriedly at Key. "Another fight?" I muttered at him.

"Just a moment," he said to me, turning to face the Raiders with a massive shit-eating grin on his face. "Hellllllllllooooooooooooo," he called out, affecting an incredibly fake Trottingham accent. "I hate to interrupt such a debate of two intellectual minds, but I believe I heard some mention of me."

The big mare glared at Key. "Yeah, what of it?"

"Well," he continued, "if the two of *you* are discussing *me*, *me* happens to be right here. So *I* suppose what *I* am saying is that *me* would like to join in on *your* conversation about *myself*."

The mare blinked. "What?"

"Oh my apologies," Erratic Key said, bowing his head. "I was simply trying to be polite and speak the native tongue. I thought it was rather rude to use proper pronouns in company that

could not. When in Roam as they say.”

The mare glared at Key. “Th’ fuck you talkin’ about?” She glanced at Jive. “Th’ fuck he talkin’ about?”

I arched an eyebrow. *Why haven’t they started shooting yet? Isn’t that what Raiders do, shoot first and then talk?* I then realized what Key was doing: he was trying to piss them off. Angry people made mistakes, and in the Wasteland, one mistake could be the difference between life and death (Wasteland Survival Guide, page 12).

The smaller stallion shrugged. “Hell if I know. Sounds more like th’ kind of shit Teach likes to go on about.”

I gulped. Right. This was the Wasteland: I knew I’d have to take a life sooner or later. I never actually *wanted* to, mind you, but I knew it was a fact sure enough as I knew the sky was gray. I glanced again at Jive, who was in a heated argument with the mare. He looked pretty bad. Knowing the Raiders, there was no way he’d ever get proper medical treatment. If I killed him, he wouldn’t be suffering any more, right? So killing him would be almost like a mercy.

Careful there, Disk. That’s how mass murderers start.

I exhaled slowly through my nose and drew my beam pistol in preparation for the inevitable fight.

“Oh,” he laughed as he placed a hoof to his mouth. “Oh ho ho ho ho. My *apologies*, good ponies. You must forgive me as I had originally thought that *you*,” he pointed to the large armored mare, “were a Hellhound! Silly me. You know, I was wondering how the green one was able to snag a bitch without being torn apart. Glad I don’t have to kill a badass like that,” he said with a chuckle before letting out a long sigh. he glanced over at the mare, who was absolutely fuming.

“It’s the chin by the way,” he said, gesturing to his face, “that’s what threw me off at first.”

The mare narrowed her eyes and glared death at Key. “I. Ain’t. *No*pony’s. Bitch.” She drew a strange-looking weapon that looked like it was some unholy combination of a pool cue, a sledgehammer, and a box of nails. With an inequine scream, she charged.

I could feel the smug coming off Erratic Key as he dodged the clumsy attack, the nail-riddled head of the mare’s weapon missing Key’s face as he drew his sword and counterattacked, nicking the tip of the milky mare’s ear. He leapt backwards to dodge another swing, carrying the fight away from me.

While Key and the Raider were having their melee duel, I noticed that Jive had pulled a hunting

rifle out and was carefully (for a Raider, at least) lining up a shot at my travelling partner. I darted behind a nearby overturned skywagon and steadied my beam pistol across the top. I aimed at the Raider, but I still couldn't bring myself to pull the trigger.

Come on Disk, what are you waiting for? You already decided that this would be a kindness, so pull the trigger!

I closed my eyes.

Forgive me...

I pulled the trigger.

SPAK

To nopony's surprise but my own, the shot went wide, striking a bit of building above the riflepony's head. This caused his attention to shift to me, however.

Oh, son of a-

My next thought was cut off when a bullet from the Raider's rifle impacted my barding. The weapon must have been in worse condition than I thought, but it was enough to knock the wind right out of me. As I lay there on the ground gasping, I tried to collect myself. However, my recovery was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a set of green legs. I looked up, and Jive pressed the end of his rifle's barrel against my forehead. my pulse shoot up, and I began to sweat furiously.

Jive smirked. "Look at you. Just lyin' here like a bitch. You gonna mess yourself, bitch?"

I couldn't do anything but continue to panic.

"That's what I thought. Now if you don't got anything to-

SPAK

As the beam lanced from my pistol, time seemed to slow. I could see Jive's eyes widen as the beam impacted his snout, and his mouth begin to open in a scream as the disintegrating magic went to work, transforming the once-living pony into so much dead sparkling ash.

I spat out my pistol and leaned the other way as I evacuated the contents of my stomach onto the street.

Oh Sisters, forgive me. There wasn't anything else I could do. ..

I wiped off my mouth and picked up my pistol. I turned my attention to Key's fight. The mare was pretty big, but magical energy weapons didn't care about that. I aimed down the sight at her.

Can you do that, Disk? Can you kill twice?

I tried following the mare's movements with my pistol, but Erratic Key kept moving. If I shot, I would more than likely hit him instead of the Raider.

No, best to let him fight this one out.

I returned my attention to the battle between Erratic Key and the Raider pony, feeling helpless. Key spared a glance in my direction, but his attention was brought back to the battle as he parried yet another blow. Unicorn telekinesis was a mystery to me, but it looked like Erratic Key was struggling, judging by the sweat pouring from his brow. The light blue aura surrounding his makeshift blade was faltering, and went out entirely as he blocked a particularly vicious strike from the Raider. The blade flew into the ground, quivering as Key fell onto his back.

Something inside me began to simmer, not entirely unlike the day before when we had our last Raider encounter.

What the hell is Key playing at? He can take this mare on by himself!

That's the point. He wants you to do it.

Fat chance.

He looked upwards, a mask of panic written large across his face. "No," he pleaded, "Please... I-I was just joking. You need to take me alive remember? Alive!"

"Alive," the Raider said. "Not whole."

Whatever it was inside me boiled over. I once again grabbed my pistol, took aim, and fired.

SPAK

The beam struck a solid hit on the mare's armored flank, but she seemed to not notice. I fired again.

SPAK

Another hit to the armor. This one seemed to stagger her a bit, causing to turn her attention to me. I fired a third time.

SPAK

A direct hit to the chest. The mare fell forward and tried to get up.

SPAK

She didn't get up.

SPAK

A hole appeared in her head.

SPAK

Her body disappeared in a flash of disintegration magic, leaving behind only ash.

I dropped my pistol and stood there, panting.

Erratic Key stood and walked to me, saying something, but my mind was elsewhere.

That's two, Disk. You're on a roll.

Shut up. She was going to kill Key! I had no choice!

I never said it was a bad thing.

Of course it's a bad thing! I just killed somepony! Ended their life!

Yeah, a miserable one. Besides, what kind of life is a Raider's? All they do is eat, sleep, and rape. Good riddance, I say.

I had no answer to that.

You realize that you just lost an argument with yourself, right?

Shut up.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts. "I... I don't believe it. I just killed somepony. *Two* someponies." I turned to Erratic Key before he could jump in. "I remember what you said earlier, but still... it's the difference between hearing about it and actually witnessing it firsthand." I stared into the middle distance. "How do you deal with it? Knowing you killed another living, sapient being?"

"You don't make a big fucking deal out of it," he retorted. "You sit with the fact that they would have killed you and you get on with your life. If you sit, wail, and whine about every single spider you stepped on, you wouldn't get anywhere, would you?" he made my way over toward the pile of ashes that was once an armor-wearing mare. "Besides," he said, "You need to save your guilt for when you need you need it."

He's right.

I mentally bucked myself and joined him at the pile of ashes. I wordlessly reached down and carefully picked the mare's strange weapon out of the pile and put it in my saddlebags, spitting out a few flakes of ashes that had been on the handle. I turned in the direction of The Crossing. "Let's get out of here. I've had enough of this fucking alley for one day."

////===////

The Crossing was little more than a shack on the bank of the Alligummy River that was owned by one Leaden Boat, who owned, yes, a lead-lined boat. Seeing as his was the only viable way across the river, he made quite a pretty bit off charging people for transport.

As we neared the shack, I held out a hoof. "Hold on; this guy can get pretty grumpy. Let me talk to him."

"Sure, go ahead," Erratic Key said, voice dripping with sarcasm,. "You already killed two drugged-up bandits. You're a big colt now. Why, before long you'll have conquered the Wasteland through both your fierce savagery and cunning silver tongue." He bowed mockingly and gestured towards the shack. "Please, go right ahead."

I considered this for a moment and quickly realized that once again, I was not being a clever pony. "Uh... right. You go ahead. I'll just, uh... I'll just follow you."

"You *are* learning aren't you," Key said, smirking. "Daddy is so proud," he pretended to wipe away a tear from his face before making his way over to the shack, giving the door three solid knocks..

The door opened a crack and a gray eye peeked out. "Yeah? Whadda you want?"

"You the boat colt?" Erratic Key asked, though it was more of a statement of fact. "How much for passage for two?" he motioned back with his head towards me.

The gray stallion looked between Key and myself. "Hundred 'n fifty." He took another look at the unicorn. "Each."

"You'll get a hundred." Erratic Key replied. "Total."

Leaden Boat huffed. "Hope you know how to swim, then, 'cause you ain't gettin' across for less."

"Is that so?" Erratic Key asked. "Tell me then, just how radioactive is this river? Like if I jumped in, how far do you think I would get until the tumors grew until my body completely exploded?"

The other stallion raised an eyebrow. "You're kidding. You're kidding, right? That's... that's suicide." He took a long look at Erratic Key. "No, you're not kidding, are you? Well, accordin' to the folks down at that sciency place, you'd die in five seconds."

"I see," Key said, turning to look out across the river. "So this is the only way across the river then?"

"Yup."

"So tell me," he said said turning back the door, "how much tourism money does Pittspur rake in annually?" Key nonchalantly looked at his hoof.

Leaden Boat frowned. "Look, buddy. I can see what you're trying to do here, but it's not gonna work. If you want to get to the other side of the river, it's a hundred fifty per passenger. That's my rate, and I'm stickin' to it." He slammed the door closed, causing the wall of the shack to shake slightly.

Key dragged an annoyed hoof across his face. "Fine. Done. Just get us across."

The stallion opened the door once more, a grin on his face. He held out a hoof. "I'm glad we could come to an agreement. Like I said, that will be three hundred caps for the two of you."

Key glared at the boatpony, his expression laced with venom as he paid the gray stallion. "There," he said bitterly. "Now if we can kindly get underway?"

"Certainly! Just let me get my nautical things." The stallion once again closed the door, and a few loud rattles emanated from the closed door before it was pulled open again. The bargekeeper had on, of all things, what looked like an old scuba mask, complete with snorkel.

I cocked an eyebrow at the pony's getup. "Uh... you're not... *swimming*, are you?"

"Of course not! This is just in case."

My eyebrows switched positions. "In case of *what*?"

"Just hope you don't have to find out."

I blinked.

Riiiiight.

Leaden Boat trotted over to a winch and placed his forehooves on it. "If one of you could give me a hoof?"

I moved to match the bargepony's stance. "So, forgive me if this comes off as rude, but... what's with the snorkel? You *do* know that river will kill you, right?"

The other pony nodded as he began pushing on the winch. "Yeh, I know. Just let me have this one thing, okay? We all have our security blankets. This one is mine."

"You know, most ponies I've met do have security blankets. Except most of them can put very large, or a very large amount of holes in some else's security blanket. Or the person holding that blanket," Erratic Key said offhoofedly.

"We all do what we have to do to get by. I run a ferry. If it just so happens that it's the only way across from Uptown to Downtown, then so be it. But if something happens to that ferry, that's all I know. And if all I know is gone, what's left for me in this Wasteland? Figure if I'm goin' to go out, I'm goin' out with some flair." He glanced at a small box with M.W.T. warning stickers all over it. "Heh. Or flares, as the case may be."

"Whatever keeps you sane old timer." Key turned to look across the river. "Whatever keeps you sane."

The stallion said nothing, but continued to work at the crank. Soon enough, a very heavy-looking barge floated into view, attached to the chain. "The 9:30 ferry to Downtown has arrived. All passengers, please board the vehicle as quickly as possible. Thank you."

I had no clue who the boatpony was talking to, but at this point, I just wanted to be out of there so badly it didn't matter to me. I hurried onto the barge and almost immediately fell over a raised portion of the floor.

"Passengers are reminded to watch their step, as parts of the barge may be under repair."

I sighed, pushed myself to my hooves, and walked over to a bench, where I sat down.

From where I was seated, I could see Leaden Boat carefully step over the spot I had tripped over and make his way to what I assumed to be the pilot's chair. *That's what the person who drives the boat is called, right?* I mentally shrugged in response to myself as Key took a spot next to me.

There was a lurch, and with an annoyingly rusty sound, we began to move.

“So how many people do you actually take across?” Erratic Key asked, looking once again over the river’s surface before returning to his earlier position, a disgusted look on his face.

“Eh, it depends on the season. In the winter, not a whole lot, you know, due to the snow and all. I sometimes get one or two crazy bastards, but that’s it. Never see them, again, of course, but then again, I don’t often get repeat customers. Usually they have something that needs getting done in Uptown, usually at the Facility, but those that go to Downtown...” He sighed. “Kinda makes you pity the loss, you know?”

“Snow?” Key asked. “What the fuck is snow?”

“Wait... what? You don’t know snow? Well, it’s... uh... you see...”

I decided to step in, quoting from a local survival guide I had tried to write once. “Historically, snow was created during the winter by the pegasi. Its actual purpose was unknown. Now, however, since the pegasi no longer take control of the weather, there are times in the year when it gets colder, and what would normally be rain falls to the ground as frozen water, or snow. However, it is still highly radioactive in this state, so going outdoors is highly inadvisable.” I could feel the boat commander’s stare through the back of my head. “What? I live in the PMRF. We learn things there.”

Key stared incredulously at me. “First off, WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? There hasn’t been change since the pegasi left. We don’t have seasonal changes anymore! How the fuck does it change here? What makes it colder? You think that kinda shit just happens? You think the world just fucking goes by, without anyone making it happen? Second of all, how the fuck does anyone live here? Radioactive rain is one thing, but that shit being frozen! What the fuck!”

I shrugged. “We’ve tried to figure it out, but we have no idea. It just kind of happens.”

“Son of a fuck,” he said, smacking his forehead with a forehoof. “So when is the next snow supposed to happen? Like how often does winter come along?”

I shrugged again. “Meteorological prognostication isn’t really an earth pony thing, and what few unicorns have passed through the PMRF had no idea either. It doesn’t happen very often, luckily. When it does happen, though, it usually happens near the end of the year, so I’d say we have a few months before we have to worry.”

“Use big words on me like that again, Disk, and I will fucking throw you into this river.”

I scooted away from Erratic Key. “Right. I’ll, uh, keep that in mind...”

The rest of the trip went by in an uncomfortable silence after that.

THUNK

“We have arrived at our destination. All passengers, please disembark in an orderly manner. Thank you for choosing Leaden Boat for all your river-crossing needs, and we hope to see you again in the off chance you don’t die a horrible death.”

I mentally facehooved and led the way off the barge, being careful to not trip over the lump in the floor where I assumed the chain connected to whatever mechanism pulled the boat from shore to shore. The shore we arrived at looked very similar to the one we were standing on not ten minutes prior, save for the husks of burnt-out skyscrapers that lined the similarly-destroyed streets. In the distance, the miraculously still-standing shape of the Solaris building could be seen towering over the rubble. A shack almost identical to the one that was on the other shore sat on my left; I assumed that Leaden Boat maintained two living places. There were a few picnic tables nearby, and I spread my map out on one of them.



“Right. So, we’re here,” I tapped at the appropriate spot, “And we have a few objectives: Scouting out the crater for Barrel, finding the Crystal Heart for High Roller, and plumbing the depths of Stable 25 for... well, everyone, really, but Healing Medley runs the project.” I turned to Erratic Key. “Which one do you think we should head for first?”

Erratic Key stared at the map, contemplating our next move. “We’ll start with Barrel’s crater. It doesn’t require us to actually do anything except go out and scout around. After that we’ll head to Stable 25. Then we’ll make our way over to the Ministry Tower and the MASEBT respectively.

If we still don't have what we're looking for, we'll head to that last location. As we go, we should keep our ears open for anything of interest. No telling what you can learn out in the Wasteland."

I nodded and stored the map back in my saddlebag. "Sounds like a plan." I gestured in the general direction of the crater. "Shall we?"

///===///

Gunfire rang out, and I darted behind a nearby corner. "Sorry!" I shouted to Erratic Key. "I really thought the shop was empty!"

"Never assume anything!" Key shouted back, dropping to the ground and hiding in the gutter of the street.

I drew my beam pistol and carefully peeked around the corner, drawing back as a bullet hit the wall next to me. "I said I was sorry!"

"Now is not the time!" Key shouted back, drawing his blade.

It had started innocently enough: we had been travelling down one of Downtown's innumerable alleys when Key spotted a general store. I couldn't tell what the name of the store was, as the name had been worn off by the passage of time, and the windows were all boarded up, their shattered glass spilled onto the street and scattered like so many motes of dust. To my Wasteland-inexperienced eyes, it looked like the perfect place to do some scavenging and foolishly rushed into the shop. Of course, Raiders being Raiders, they had decided to "redecorate" the inside with the entrails of one of their unfortunate victims.

I had had just enough fortitude to get out of there before they started using the door as cover to take pot shots at me. From what I could tell, there weren't very many of them; probably four, and judging from the way they had to reload after each shot, I imagined they were using rifles of some kind.

Back in the present, I glanced over at Key. "What do we do?"

He didn't answer, preferring instead to concentrate on the shop where the Raiders were bunkered, likely leaning against one another in order to shoot at us at the same time. Without warning, both the handle of the door and Key's horn glowed light blue and the door swung forward, dumping one of the Raiders on the ground. I winced as he fell, and winced again as the door slammed into the others, knocking them back into the store.

I saw Key charge towards the Raider on the street, who looked a bit dazed as he picked up his rifle. I attempted to shoot him, but my shot went wide and buried itself in the shell of a street light.

As he neared the fallen Raider, Key scooped up a hooffull of glass shards and flung them into the other pony's face. The Raider recoiled as if hit with an invisible hoof and flailed at the air, his eyes clenched shut, unaware of the tragedy that was about to befall him. I turned away; I couldn't watch.

Unfortunately, I could still hear.

The Raider screamed.

There was a stomach-churning sound.

The Raider was silent.

I hazarded a glance towards my travelling companion and almost immediately regretted it as I saw the Raider's blood spray out at high velocity. As I watched, Key grabbed the corpse with his hooves as the door, moldy with age and rain, sagged inwards under the glow of Key's magic. I couldn't tell from my angle, but the Raiders on the other side of the door were probably rather surprised at this sudden development.

Erratic Key threw the Raider bodily into the store, his rifle clattering onto the street. I ran forward and grabbed it, holstering my own weapon in the process, then dashed into the store. I didn't see the pony with the blade through her skull, and I *certainly* didn't see the pony rolling on the ground in agony with a large piece of glass through his jaw. I did, however, see the pony who was trying to attack Key with a fire axe. I aimed the rifle, clumsy with its unfamiliar design, and fired.

BANG

For once, I got lucky and my bullet struck true. The pony's head exploded into bits, and I dropped the gun as the recoil shook my jaw. I heard it clatter off into some corner somewhere.

I heard the sounds of squishy melee combat behind me and did my best to concentrate on the one square inch of floor in front of me that was not covered in blood. "If I turn around, am I going to regret it?" I asked over my shoulder when the fighting had finished.

"Off the streets, now," was Key's only reply, his voice tense. "Where do we go?"

I checked my map. "It looks like we should be somewhere on 6th Avenue. To get to the crater, we'll have to head east, and the most direct route would be... uh..." I stared at the map, the roads forming a spider web of criss-crossing paths. "It looks like there really isn't a direct route. Maybe the underground train is more direct? I don't know; I've never been there."

////===////

A few minutes later found the both of us in the bowels of an abandoned subway station, Key pacing back and forth in front of me, trying to wipe off the bits of Raider from his coat with a hoof. "Alright, if either of us are going to survive out here, it's obvious I'm going to have to teach you how to fight. First things first," He gestured around us with a forehoof. "I want you to look around. What do you see?"

I did as asked. Piles of rubble were scattered about the room, illuminated by what little light filtered down the stairs leading to the world above, giving everything a sickly blueish-green tint. Skeletons of ponies past littered the floor, with a larger congregation close to the edge of the boarding platform. I could only assume they were commuters on their way to or from work. I knew they were long dead, but I still felt a slight twinge in my chest for them. The air was thick with the smell of mold and rust; in the distance I could hear the faint dripping of water. "A whole lot of wasted potential." I sighed. "But that's probably not what you're looking for, is it?"

"Well, you're certainly not very far off," Key said, surprising me. He turned to look at the remains of the subway system. "Some ponies might see a tunnel, or perhaps a long hall of wasted junk, or wasted potential, but if you look close enough at anything, you'll notice one thing: ponies. Every building in this city, every structure built, was made by ponies." He turned back to face me. "Now what does this tell you about ponies?"

I tapped my chin in thought. "I can think of several things, but I doubt any of them are what you're thinking of."

Key sighed. "Come on, Disk. It's no fun if you don't play the game. Besides, these roundabout ways of telling you stuff make me feel smart. Be a pal and guess."

I rolled my eyes. "Ugh, fine. Uh... the city was heavily populated?"

Key tilted his head back and forth, evaluating my answer. "Well yes, but what I mean is what does it tell you about ponies? As in you and me and everyone else? Since this one is a little hard, I'll ask you another question." He held his hoof up to my face. "Look at this. What does it tell you about me? What does it tell you about yourself? What does it say about all ponies everywhere?"

I took a look at Key's hoof, trying to discern what it is he wanted me to see. It looked like a hoof that could belong to anypony who had traveled the Wasteland long enough: slightly cracked with numerous minor cuts and bruises along the frog. "Uh... non-unicorns have a hard time holding things?"

"Exactly," he replied, eliciting a baffled expression from me. "Before you can actually learn to

fight, you need to know what happens in a fight, and the first place to start is what happens to you in a fight.”

I tilted my head in confusion. “What does that have to do with your hoof?”

“What is a hoof, Data Disk? What is a claw? What is a paw? What are all these things to each other? Look at yourself, Disk. You are a pony. You are designed to, in a situation of crisis, perform one action: run.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Okay…”

“In a fight, certain instincts kick in, and certain things happen to you. One of the first things to happen when the first shot is fired is that everything stops. These are your natural instincts kicking in. The flight or fight moment, where you would normally determine whether or not the best action to do is to run the fuck away, or try to stay and fight whatever it is that’s threatening you. Based on the fact that ponies are mostly suited to being able to gallop long distances, which instinct do you think is going to be stronger?”

This was getting closer to familiar territory. “Flight, I would imagine.”

“You would imagine correctly. But for now let’s focus on the moment of deciding action. This moment typically occurs as soon as you sense danger. It’s usually auditory in nature, like a gunshot being fired, or the scream of a raving bandit. But stay out here long enough and the simple sight of another pony can set it off. Anyway, it’s during this moment that time seems to stop. Typically, perception is heightened to an unrivaled level. You’ll pick out certain details which better help you decide to run or fight. However, the details that are picked out can completely destroy anything else in the scene. For instance, if a pony walks into a store and starts shooting the place up, everypony will be able to tell you every detail about the gun that was used. Any scratches, marks, or sort of stand-outish details on the weapon will stick the person’s mind. No one, however, will tell you that the guy was wearing a hat.”

I sat, winced, moved the bone I had sat on out of the way, and sat again. “Sounds familiar enough. I remember Asclepius Staff talking about that a few times back at the PMRF.”

“Mm-hm,” Key said, nodding. “One of the things you need to work on is getting as much detail as you possibly can during this moment. Look around everywhere for anything you can use, because your eyes are your best friends during that split second, and after the moment of clarity comes the absolute shit storm of reflexive reaction. Once you’ve chosen to actually do something, your adrenaline is going to kick in and shit will go crazy. You ever hear about someone talking about how something traumatic ‘happened so fast’?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Plenty of times. You get put on clinic duty enough and you see all kinds come through.”

"It's because people are acting on basic instinct. All their reactions are shortcutting through their thought process because they're acting entirely on reflex at this point. This when combat gets hectic, and nothing can prepare you for it. One of the hardest things to do is keep your cool under pressure and actually think about what you want to do, because, and this is where being a pony sucks, ninety-nine percent of the time, you. Will want. To *run*. And I don't care how fast you are, no one outruns a bullet. Now let me see your weapon."

I pulled my beam pistol from its holster and set it on the ground in front of me. "Here you go. I swear, if you break this..."

My fears were unfounded, though, as Key levitated the pistol up and started slowly turning it around. "I want you to describe this weapon. Any details at all."

I thought for a bit. "Well, it's a standard beam pistol, so it's pretty much a box on a stick. You've got a weird X-shaped series of ridges on the front; that's the emitter. On the top is a pair of fins that act as sights, and on the back you have the arcane regulator knob as well as the slot for spark batteries. Then along the bottom you have the actual mouthgrip, since this is a non-unicorn model. That bit looks like a little U with another one inside of it."

Erratic Key spun the weapon around so that I was almost gripping it in my teeth. "Look down the sight. Now what do you see?"

"I see... your face?"

"Yes, I suppose you do. But more importantly..." without any other warning, Key flipped the gun around so it was pointed at me, causing me to flinch away. "When you hold a gun in front of you, what do you do?"

I eyed Key nervously. *What is he doing?* "You close one eye."

Key nodded. "Correct again. In aiming, you have to hold an eye closed to see properly. This fucks with pony physiology in ways you don't even know." the beam pistol floated back to a more neutral position between the two of us, and I relaxed a bit. "Ponies' eyes are located on the sides of our heads; it gives us more peripheral vision, allowing us to take in more and be aware of what's around us. In aiming a gun, you stop doing this, and your eyes become predatory. You're looking at something you intend to kill: your prey. And when you pull the trigger... well, ponies aren't exactly meant to see the insides of anything. The effect that this has is that, when you close that eye, your visual reception goes up the wazoo. you can make out more detail, you see more, it seems to happen slower, and then every kill you make comes back to you in a higher than normal quality. This, along with the physiological implications of a species designed to run from fights killing something, is what tends to break a lot of people. They just can't handle it. Killing someone else is one of the most crystal clear moments that

ponies often experience, often because the memory is so easy to remember. Its just another reason why the act of killing will initially stick in your mind for a long time.”

“Okay, so how is this teaching me how to fight? I mean, don’t get me wrong, this is fascinating stuff, but it’s probably not going to do anything for the nightmares I’m inevitably going to have tonight.”

“You have to actually know what you’re getting into before you can do anything about it. Ponies aren’t meant to fight. So when you get into one, you have to go against almost every instinct you have. You have to fight your very own nature to stay alive sometimes. Learning to fight isn’t all about aiming a gun, it’s about keeping your head, staying calm, and never running out into the open while shots are being fired. Understand?”

“Aha.” I nodded, slower this time. “Yes. I think I see where you’re going with this.”

“Good,” Key said, nodding in return. “Now once you understand what happens in combat, you can start learning how to control combat.” My pistol still floating in midair, Key levitated the dud grenade from his saddlebag. “You remember this guy?”

I let out a humorless chuckle. “Kind of hard to forget, actually.”

“True. Most ponies who live long enough to get in several firefight know to stay in cover where you can’t hit them. This little guy, however, tends to get rid of any notions of staying in one place. It basically overloads a pony’s natural want to run, because it’s a fucking grenade. Combat control is the most essential skill a pony can have. You can be the fastest draw, or the best shot, but if you don’t know how to get yourself out of every situation, then you’re going to die. Get it?”

I nodded firmly. “Got it.”

“Good.” Erratic Key levitated my gun back into its holster.. “We shouldn’t stay in one place too long. Let’s get moving.”

“Right.” I stood up and brushed myself off. “If I remember my map correctly, the crater should be eastish of here. Of course, there aren’t any direct roads, but...” I looked down the tunnel. The husk of a train sat against one wall. It made the passage narrow, but not impassable. Past the bend I could see nothing but darkness. “I suppose the subway might be a bit more direct, but without any source of light there’s no way we’re getting through there alive.”

“Why? What kind of stuff does Pittspur have in its subway tunnels?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know, but there’s not really much light down there. If we get attacked by anything...” I left the sentence dangling in the air like a falling dust mote..

Key smirked, his horn beginning to glow with enough light to cast the discoloration from the station.. “You're not familiar with unicorns are you?”

I scratched the back of my neck in embarrassment. “Not really, no. The only other unicorn I’ve met was Asclepius Staff, and, well...” I stared at the ground. “Yeah.”

Erratic Key’s muzzle split open in a massive grin. “Oh this is gonna be fun. If the dark is all we have to worry about then we’ve got that covered. But do you know of anything in living in these stories?”

I gulped, wary of my companion’s sudden change in demeanor. “Uh... what stories?”

“Oh you know,” he said waving a forehoof nonchalantly, “the stories you hear about the horrific feral ghouls living in the sewers. The mutated monsters, and horrific creatures that dwell within the dark. Anything like that around here?”

I took an instinctive step back. “Well, uh... no. Not really, no. But they’re probably still really dangerous!” I could feel my legs starting to wobble a bit as I spoke.

“More so than the surface?”

“Erm...” I shifted my gaze uneasily between Key and the maw of the tunnel. “Well... to be perfectly honest, I don’t know. I just... have this feeling.”

“Where exactly do these tunnels lead?” Key asked, angling his head to shine a beam of light down the tunnel.

The sudden brightness made me wince and shield my eyes with a forehoof. I glanced at where Key’s spell was pointing, but all I could see was a piece of wall, darkened with decay and crumbling with age. I pulled out my map again. “I don’t know. Judging by the pattern of the stations, it looks like they curve towards the south, but with that crater, there could be some sort of exposed tunnel leading to the surface. I still don’t know if I want to chance it, though.”

“Then we’ll head back up,” Key said, dimming the light from his horn. “We should get going. We don’t want to be out here at nightfall.”

I rolled the map back up and placed it in my saddlebags. “Right. We should probably find somewhere to camp for the night, preferably without Raiders this time.”

////=====////

While I had previously read about the effects of balefire bombs, witnessing the aftermath of one

firsthoof, even hundreds of years after the fact, was spine-chilling. Like a gigantic hoof had stomped down from the heavens, all that remained of whatever Pre-War facility had been here was so much melted scrap and fused asphalt. "Wow. This is..." I turned to my travelling partner, and noticed he was similarly enthralled by the horrible scene behind us. "Yeah," I lamely finished. As the sky began to dim from its daytime gray to the darker gray of night, I noticed that a very faint green glow still lingered about the crater, casting everything in an otherworldly hue. I fished out a bottle of Rad-X from my saddlebag and chomped down on the chalky pill, offering the bottle to Erratic Key. "Rad-X?"

He held out a hoof, and I tipped out a pill for him as well. I replaced the bottle in my bag, and, remembering Key's earlier lesson, drew my beam pistol as I followed him, head swiveling around in all directions. "So what do you think we're going to find down here?"

"No idea," He said, the faintest of magical auras surrounding the hilt of his blade. "But if we find anything, it'll be big enough, strong enough, ugly enough, and irradiated enough to probably kill us. If the radiation doesn't take care of us, that is."

Key's words sent me into an even more worried state as I whipped my head around at an even more frantic rate, my ears joining in as they panned around, searching for even the smallest sign of trouble. Every shadow suddenly seemed more malevolent than before, and several times I caught myself almost shooting at some shifting debris or falling rocks.

"Calm down Disk," Key said reassuringly. "If there is something here we'll see it before it can sneak up on us." He paused. "You'll probably smell it too."

I tried to take a deep breath, but the foul air that permeated the area made me cough. "Over this mess?" I thought about it for a bit. Anything that could survive this much radiation would have to have some incredibly tough skin or something, probably making it hard for it to bathe. "Yeah, I guess-" My words died in my throat as I stood beside Key at the crater's edge. If the outer part was the result of an angry dragon, then the inside of the crater was the depths of Tartarus. I had no idea how deep the pit in front of me actually was, but I could see what looked like a soup of some greenish stuff (probably balefire residue, the studious part of my mind added) in the middle, surrounded by the shells of twisted and dead skywagons. The walls of the crater sloped in almost a perfect sphere, as if when the balefire bomb had detonated, it had simply scooped out the terrain. It looked tricky, but navigable, if one was insane. I glanced at Key incredulously. "We're going down into *that*?"

Key was silent for a few moments as he inspected the ground. "We're not going down all the way," he finally answered. "We just need to see if there's anything here. Then we'll leave. By the way, does this look different to you?" he held up a forehoof, a bit of what looked like dirt clinging to the tip.

I the proffered hoof and noticed that it was not dirt, but in fact very small rocks that clumped

together, forming not-really-soil. "Yeah, that's... really weird. From what I read, the balefire bombs put out an insane amount of heat. This should all be glass. What the heck?"

"Yeah," Key said, returning his attention to the crater, "Grab some of that to bring back to Barrel and then follow me. There's probably something more further down."

I looked around and was able to find a discarded water bottle, devoid of its contents, and used it to scoop a bit of the aberrant soil from the ground before following Key as carefully as I could.

"Hey, Disk," he called from lower down in the crater, "You see anything?"

I slowed my head's erratic movements and gave the crater a scan. Though it was still very dark, I thought I could see some very strange shapes moving in our general direction from the center of the crater. I skidded down the scree to where Key was positioned. "I think I saw... *something*, I have no idea what, but it looked like it might have been heading for us. It was still near the middle of the crater, so we probably have a bit of time before we're in trouble. What's the plan?"

Key looked out from the skywagon we were hiding behind, then back at me. "There's nothing down there."

I took a look for myself, and, just as Key had said, there was no sign of any movement. "Huh. I could have sworn-"

My train of thought was interrupted when I heard a certain sound, one that made my blood run cold: [the rain warning siren](#).

I spun around to face Key, my face stricken with fear. "Oh shit. We have to get out of here!"

Key looked up to the sky, and then everything went crazy.

Justifying my worst fears, the ground erupted beneath Erratic Key and myself, scattering both dirt and ponies quite some distance. I hit the ground, and felt the wind leave my lungs with an almighty woosh. *Ow... ow ow ow. That's definitely going to bruise at the very least.* My side aching from the impact, I pushed myself to my hooves, at which point I almost went right down again.

Standing before the both of us were a pair of... things: twisted masses of flesh curled around in an unnatural sideways U shape with what looked like pods of flesh hanging from the top portion, and six scrawny legs lining the bottom. Key's earlier prediction had been correct: despite the stench that permeated the area, the smell coming off the abominations was far worse.

Just when I thought that these things couldn't get any more hideous, the tip on one of the creature's top parts opened up, both revealing the disgustingly pink inside of the thing and

letting out an ear-splitting inequine shriek.

My legs locked up in fear, and I stared, eyes wide as dinner plates. I began to tremble, and in my shaking, I accidentally fired my beam pistol.

SPAK

The red bolt of energy shot from my mouth-held weapon and hit the creature right in one of its bulbs, which burst, releasing an even more foul-smelling liquid in a small puddle on the ground.

I could hear the ground hissing underneath it.

Luckily, my accidental shot seemed to break whatever spell had been placed over me, and I ran, faster than I had ever run before.

I found solace behind one of the skywagon wrecks and peeked out. The creature was slowly but inexorably making its way towards me. Behind it, I could see Erratic Key engaging with his own monster. Perhaps it was the radiation, or perhaps it was my own fear, but it seemed to me like the creature was winning, which of course, was impossible. Key was the best fighter I knew! There was no way some-

A splash of acid near my ear cut my train of thought short, and I pulled my head back for fear of its safety. *Okay Disk, just like Key told you. Don't panic. That's the worst possible thing you can do.*

How can I not panic!? There's some huge... thing out there, rain is on its way, and oh yeah, did I forget to mention the fact that I'm sitting in a fucking BALEFIRE BOMB CRATER?

For once, I had nothing to say in response to myself. Despite that, I tried to take a deep breath. I poked my head out from behind my cover once more. The creature was still there, but even closer this time. I closed one eye, aiming down the barrel of my pistol. I squeezed the mouthgrip.

click

What. I squeezed again, certain I had-

click. click click click.

Of all the worst possible times for this to happen... As the creature closed even more distance, I felt my heart beat faster and my breathing accelerate. I looked around for another skywagon and dashed over to it. This once was closer to the center of the crater, but further from the creature, and that's all that mattered. I spat my pistol out onto the ground, the mouthgrip shining

purple as its disinfecting magic got to work. I fumbled in my bags, searching for the replacement spark batteries I knew I had-

Several blue twinkles in the distance caught my eye. Several very *spark battery*-shaped twinkles, to be exact. *Oh, Sisters fucking damnit!* It was then that my rummaging hoof felt something I had forgotten about. Something that felt like a cross between a sledgehammer, a pool cue, and a box of nails.

I pulled Grief out from my saddlebags and gave it a few experimental swings. *Woah, that was weird. Okay, note to self: move eyes while swinging to maintain visual contact with target.* I turned around, which is right when the sky decided that it was going to join in on shitting all over my day.

It started with a bowel-shaking crack of thunder, shortly followed by the first drops of rain. I hadn't been in the rain before, being a sane pony, so I was understandably surprised when the rain completely failed to sizzle like the monstrosities' acid when it landed on my snout. However, i knew that Key and I had precious little time before the creatures would be the least of our problems.

For some reason, my mind flashed to the image of Barrel, her red mane and brown coat offsetting each other like a perfectly framed picture. She had a job for us to do, and by Luna's sparkling alicorn, I was going to do it!

My heart filled with renewed determination, I ran at the abomination, turned my head, and swung my Grief with all my might.

The sound as it hit the creature was like the one you would get from squishing your hooves through a thick crust of swamp bile combined with the crunch of peeling off a scab. It made my stomach churn, but I managed to keep it in. As I pulled the weapon free of the creature's skin, I noticed with a sort of grim fascination that the nails in the head of the weapon were placed in such a way that they tore up as much flesh as they could.

The weapon free, I could see that there was now a small chunk missing from the side of the thing, leaking blood, bile, and some other fluids I couldn't identify over the ground. It swayed side to side as it continued its advance, emitting that horrible shriek as it did so. From the gaping cavity on its front, it would intermittently spit gouts of stinking acid, which I did my best to dodge, but despite my best efforts, I still ended up taking a direct hit from one of its attacks.

I sat behind yet another skycarriage wreck, this one bearing a worn inscription on its bumper: "Ho s y fl ng? al 5 - 8 24 W2 J" If it were any other time, I might have considered puzzling out the meaning. However, as it was, I had more pressing concerns. I downed a healing potion and watched the acid disappear from my chest, taking with it the burning pain that it engendered. As I placed the empty bottle back in my bag, my hoof brushed a metal syringe that

I knew was lying next to an orange pill bottle containing an oversized similarly-colored tablet
You know, those would really help right about now

Are you crazy!? You know what that shit is!

Yes. It's our win condition.

*No, it's an anabolic steroid and a highly-addictive painkiller, both intended for medical use!
Neither are intended for use with each other outside of-*

The first part of me crushed the second underhoof as I opened the bottle, popped the pill in my mouth, and chewed as I pulled the syringe out and jabbed my foreleg with it.

A few seconds passed before I felt the effects of the Buck/Med-X combo, but when I did, oh man, did I feel like I was on top of the world! I grabbed my Grief from where it had fallen, and I charged out to meet the monstrosity head-on... figuratively speaking, of course. I let out a growl, swung with all my might, and was rewarded with the sound of squishing tissue. In the back of my mind, a small part of me idly noted that not five seconds ago I hadn't even remotely considering the chems' existence, but I ignored it. For the first time in a long time, I was legitimately having fun.

The creature fought back, stabbing at me with its pointed limbs and burning acid, but I neither felt nor cared. All I needed was the swing of my Grief and the squishing of flesh, and I was set. Oh yes, that squishing. The most joyous sound in the world, the epitome of-

Something in the back of my head went *DINK* and I stopped. The last few minutes were a blur of motion and anger. My chest was on fire, everywhere else hurt, my hooves and mouth were numb, I had a strange taste in my mouth, and my coat felt like it was covered in a thick layer of mud. What had I...?

I looked down at my hooves and nearly collapsed. I was standing in the middle of a large pile of flesh, the stink of it causing my head to spin. I tried to step out of it, but the burning in my chest stopped me. A glance confirmed my suspicions: I had a large gash running down my front, running from my collarbone (missing the carotid, luckily) and down to just above my front left forehoof. I fumbled with numb hooves in my pack for a healing potion, found one, and promptly spilled it all over the ground when I found that my equally-numb mouth was filled with something. I mustered up my strength and spat, large chunks of flesh falling from my mouth to the ground. It was then that I noticed Grief lying in the dirt several feet away. *Was I attacking that thing... with my mouth!?* The thought of doing something so completely horrid caused my stomach to churn. Before I completely lost it, I forced myself to down the last of my health potions, the magical solution knitting my wounds closed, leaving only a pencil-thin line on my chest to indicate there had ever been an injury there. I carefully extricated myself from the tangled mass of tissue I was occupying and limped my way over to where Grief had fallen. I

counted myself lucky that the rain was still only a drizzle at this point, but I knew that a real shower could start at any moment. I chomped the last of my Rad-X and began my search for Erratic Key.

////=====////

It didn't take me all that long to find Erratic Key, as the unicorn had a certain knack for making quite the mess. I approached his prone form and nudged it with a hoof. "Hey. Hey Key, get up. We have to get out of here before the radiation gets us," I attempted to say, but my numb mouth caused my speech to become so much garbled nonsense.

Key was a mess. He was covered in so many slashes, puncture wounds, and acid burns that I was actually surprised when he let out a low moan and tried to pull himself forward by his forelegs. I bent down to try and help him up, but my numb-leggedness just cause me to fall into the dirt with him. I let out a grunt of frustration. "Come on! We need to get going!"

The rainfall increased to a steady trickle as Key ignored my pleas and continued to drag his broken self along the ground.

What's taking him so-

I noticed the large rip in Key's saddlebags. "Oh shit, what did you lose?"

In response, he simply collapsed. Whether due to radiation or from his wounds, I didn't know, nor did I care. "Key? You okay?" I gathered what little strength I could and lifted myself to my hooves, the weight of Key on my back causing me to sink into the wet ground a bit. I looked to where I saw the unicorn was crawling to, and saw a hooffull of what I recognized to be memory orbs scattered in the dirt. I managed to get them into my saddlebags, but not without a considerable expenditure of time and effort. No sooner had I finished than I began to feel a slow burning sensation on my hide. As a semi-trained Wasteland medical pony, I knew what radiation was supposed to feel like, and this was definitely radiation.

I turned tail and began to run to the crater wall I had come down, but thanks to the combination of my exhaustion, Key's weight, the muddy ground, and the aftereffects of the Buck/Med-X combo, I didn't get far before the burning became an overwhelming pain and I fell to my knees.

No, it can't end here! A small detached part of myself noted how cliché I was being as my sight dimmed. *There are still so many people I can help!*

Just before I completely lost my vision, I saw a large number of legs approaching. I reached out to them and tried to vocalize something, but my body decided that it had enough, and I passed out.

///===///

The first thing I noticed upon regaining consciousness was pain. My entire body ached, from the tips of my ears down to my hooves. The second thing I noticed was that I was lying on a very cold concrete floor. I tried to push myself into a standing position, but as soon as I put any weight on my hoof, a wave of nausea swept over me, causing me to collapse once more.

From my vantage point on the ground, I could see that I was in some sort of oversized cage, the room's sickly greenish-yellow light giving the metal an almost otherworldly tint. I tilted my head and saw Erratic Key lying on the floor nearby behind a similar set of bars, bereft of both barding and gear, same as myself. Judging from his regular breathing, he was asleep, which was good news to me, as it meant that he wasn't dead. I was also unable to not notice the small patches of skin showing through the unicorn's normally-full lavender coat, giving him a slight mottled appearance. Looking at myself, I could see that the radiation had produced a similar effect on my coat. I did some (not-so) quick calculations and determined that he, and by extension, I, must have been asleep for at least a day, given our probable level of radiation exposure. A small, cold part of myself noted that if the both of us didn't get proper treatment within the day, we would probably die.

Small as my motions were, they must have been enough to attract the attention of whoever was nearby, as I heard the distinct cllop of hooves on concrete. I turned my head again, but regretted the action almost instantly. In front of me was one of the ugliest, biggest Raiders I had ever seen.

His face, crisscrossed with scars and decorated with innumerable piercings, split into a wide grin. "Well, well, well. Look who finally decided to wake up."

Even from my spot on the floor, the stench of the Raider's breath made me gag. It carried with it the smell of poor dental hygiene, Jet, and the unfortunately now-familiar stench of rotten flesh.

My captor took a deep breath, and I braced myself. "HEY! FOOD'S AWAKE!"

The clomping of hooves on concrete drew my attention to a point past my captor, who I had failed to notice was wearing an (empty) battle saddle. As I watched, to my growing concern, a large number of Raiders flowed into the room, all of them some variation on a yellow/orange/green color palette. Similar to the pair of Raiders we had encountered just that morning (but what felt like oh so long ago) I noticed that quite a few of them had patches missing from their coats and were shaking. Unfortunately, the increase in Raiders in the room also made for an increase in their smell (and weapons, that detached part of me noted). I dragged a limp hoof across my snout in a poor attempt to block their stench out.

"I... what? I'm not..." My brain decided that it was done being stuck in molasses, and the realization hit me like a speeding bullet, sending a cold shock down my spine. "Oh."

Seeing the look on my face, the Raider in front of the cage, who I assumed was the leader, gave a cruel laugh. "Oh, now 'e gets it! 'ey boys, 'e got it! Took him long enough, eh?"

The gathered Raiders shared in the laugh, a sound that made my skin crawl.

"Ain't real often we get fresh meat round here." The leader leaned in towards the bars of the cell, a smirk on his face. "Price is too high. You fuckers came pretty cheap though."

Perhaps it was Raider logic, or maybe it was a side-effect of the radiation, but I once again could not figure out what he was trying to say. I said nothing, opting instead to shake in fear.

"Eheheheh. Whasamatter? Scared? Go ahead and shit yerself. It'll save us the trouble a' havin' ta clean 'ya out." He chuckled sinisterly. "So tell me. I'm curious. Whatcha do to piss off those cloak wearin' chucklefucks?"

The Raider wanted to talk? This was new. My self-preservation and my curiosity did battle for a split second before my curiosity got the better of me. "I have absolute- no. Wait. It wasn't me, it was-" I remembered who I was talking to, and quickly changed my story. "Somepony I knew. They killed one of their members, apparently. We had no idea who they were!" I held my forehooves in front of me in an attempt at a placating gesture. "I swear! They just started shooting at us! No mention of the cloak-ponies or anything!"

The raider exploded in laughter, "Oh you don't even fuckin' know, do 'ya?!" The rest of the Raiders joined in with their leader's laughter. "You'd have to do a whole lot more than kill some random shit biscuit to piss off the Shaper's Six," he said snidely. "Come on, no need to take it to yer grave, yer gonna die anyway! What else can we do ta 'ya?"

I attempted to meld into the bars behind me as I tried to put more distance between myself and the Raider. "Th-that's what I'm afraid of."

"The stupid one, eh," he said with a frown as he turned away from the bars. "Suppose I'll ask yer friend there once he wakes up," he motioned over to Erratic Key, " he's a hell a lot more interesting." My captor reached into the packs attached to his battle saddle and pulled out a memory orb.

My sluggish brain eventually managed to put two and two and two together and came up with six and a bit. Once again, my self-preservation died at the hooves of curiosity. "Uh... dare I ask why you have that?"

"Do you fuckin' know anything?" the Raider said, perplexed. "Are you even fuckin' aware of what you did? Who you're with?"

I had a sinking feeling that I was about to find something out about Erratic Key that I would have later wished I hadn't. Despite this, it *would* have been an opportunity to learn more about the pony that I had, for whatever reason, been trusting my life to. After more internal debate, I answered: "When you put it like that, no, not really." I realized that I was acting rather non-logical with this Raider, what with holding an actual conversation and all, and a part of me was yelling at myself, trying to get my attention that I should definitely not, under no circumstances, continue down this train of oh Sisters what was I doing. I scrambled back to the rear of the cage and resumed my previous shaking, having unconsciously been moving forwards while talking. "Wait a second! You're going to *kill* and **EAT** me!" My voice cracked with fear. "Why in the name of all that the Sisters hold dear should I trust *you*!?"

"If you can't trust someone who'll tell 'ya to yer face that 'e's gonna dine on your corpse, then who can 'ya trust?"

I... had no real response to that, actually. I assumed the Raider must have been on Mint-als or something similar, because I couldn't find anything wrong with his statement. All I could do was open and close my mouth like a fish as I tried to put into words just how *wrong* this situation felt. "E... b... g!" Nope. My mouth just did not want to cooperate.

The Raider laughed again, motioning for the rest of the herd to clear out. Once we were alone he threw the orb into my cell. "Oh, you can trust me," he said with a sadistic grin, "you can trust that I'll be nibbling on yer squishy little hide with a smile on my face. You can also trust that I do find you two pretty interesting. Not every day we get one in here with two Marks." The Raider walked over to a shelf on the opposite wall and pulled out a mess of gold shaped in the vague impression of what almost looked like a tiara in a past life, if the tiara had been for a pony with a very lumpy head. Near the top of the device was a small gap, which I assumed, based on context, was for the memory orb. The Raider tossed the thing into my cell, where it *clinked* along the floor before stopping next to my prone form. "Now why don't you enjoy one last little bit of peace? I promise I won't kill you while you're under."

I had no reason to trust this pony at all, but the memory orb... I had heard stories about them, about their power... the ability to store the memory of another pony, and to then be able to re-live them at will! Of course, that required magic, but I assumed that that was what the device was for. Despite myself, I picked it up and turned it over in my hooves. Yes, there it was: a small arcane capacitor sat at the rear of one of the temple pieces connected to a bundle of wires that spread across the inner edge of the headpiece. I looked from the device to the Raider, then to Key.

What in the hell am I doing?

That's what I've been saying!

I mean, on the one hoof, I might get to learn something about Erratic Key, but on the other...

On the other, you're following the directions of a junkie Raider!

This is true. You can't fault his logic, though. If worst comes to worst, we won't have to worry about it, will we?

...

Well, you only live once... I clipped the memory orb into place and slipped the device onto my head. Almost instantly, I felt the world slide away from me like an oil slick around my entire body.

As reality fell away, I could distantly hear the Raider say one last thing, almost as an aside: "It'll make killin' ya later all the more fun."

o0o0o0o

The first thing I noticed was that I no longer felt like my life was being slowly sucked through a straw. That was a relief, at least. Then I noticed a slight pressure in the middle of my forehead. *Oh, now that's weird.* I then noticed the complete and utter lack of light. From off to my side, a young voice made itself known:

"Uncle Key."

If Key had noticed, he didn't show it.

"Uncle Keeeeey!"

Erratic Key grumbled something indistinct, a very odd sensation when you aren't the one moving your own mouth. He opened his eyes, revealing a pair of vividly blue eyes wide with the wonders of foalhood. The filly bounced back at Key's opening his eyes, revealing an orange coat and radioactive green mane.

"Uncle Keeeeey, wake uuuup!"

Erratic Key smacked his lips a few times before managing to wake up enough to get out of bed. "Ugh, what did you set on fire *now*, Tart Sauce?" Key idly glanced around the room, revealing a very plain room in a wooden house with nothing in it but the bed he had just vacated and the remnants of a small bathroom.

The foal stomped a forehoof. "I didn't *do* anything, and don't *call* me that! I'm not a baby any more!"

My host pulled one of his forelegs under in a deep mock bow, once again affecting a ridiculous

accent. "Hwhell excuse me, madame. Do tell me hwhat grand occasion has come up that I should be graced hwhith being visited by such a fine young mare as yourself, Orange Tart."

The filly gave Key an unamused look. "You're not funny, Uncle Key. And you know why! Today's the day!"

Key's head jerked up as if he had just remembered something. "Right! You have that doctor appointment today. Got it."

"Uncle Keeey!" The filly began jumping up and down. "Today's the day I finally get to go out with you, Momma, and Daddy!"

Key's heart rate went up a few notches at that. "Oh, is that, uh, is that today?"

Orange Tart stopped her imitation of a spring. "Yeah-huh! Daddy said that when I turn twelve I can go out with you guys and get stuff!"

If Orange Tart was trying to calm Key down, she failed miserably. "A-are you twelve now?" My host gave a weak chuckle. "You don't want to spend your birthday out-"

"Mama already tried that," Orange Tart interrupted, a smug grin on her face.

"Well how about we get some breakfast first?" Key began walking out the door. However, before he could open it, there was a knock on it. There was a strange tingle in the middle of my forehead as Key used his magic to open it to reveal a surprised dark gray earth pony with a blue mane. However, Key's attention was more focused on the mare standing behind him, a unicorn mare with a light gray coat and white mane.

The stallion spoke first. "Well, I thought I might have to break the door down to wake you up this early." He leaned to look past Key and into the room. "You haven't seen-" He cut himself off, apparently having spotted what he was looking for.

"What?" My host turned to face away from the other ponies. "Have I seen little Tart Sauce anywhere? Nope." There was that awkward tingle again as he levitated a blanket over the filly. "Just me and my ghost blanket."

"Uncle Keeeeeey!" Tart Sauce shook the offending cloth off herself.

The corners of Key's mouth turned upwards as he returned his attention back to the stallion and mare, the former of whom had an eyebrow raised in amusement while the mare giggled lightly. "So what's going on, Circuit?"

The stallion shrugged. "Business as usual. Vein and I are heading out with some of the others

for a supply run.”

The mare, Vein, I assumed, stepped forward. “We were hoping you would join us, Key.” The effect the mare’s voice had on my host’s body was astonishing. His eyelids began to droop and his stance relaxed, something I would have never considered possible for the present-day Erratic Key to be capable of.

Huh. The more you know...

Key raised an eyebrow. “You never ask me to go on any ‘normal’ run. What makes this run different?”

Circuit glanced around nervously. “Well, I wanted to-”

Orange Tart suddenly bounced in between the two stallions, a grin on her face stretching from ear to ear. “Come with us, Uncle Key! We can all go together!”

Key glanced back at Circuit, who at this point looked like he wanted to vanish on the spot. “Tart, sweetie, why don’t you and your mom go get ready while I talk to Uncle Key?”

The filly cocked her head. “Whatcha gonna talk about, Daddy?”

Circuit gestured noncommittally in the air with a forehoof. “Oh... just some adult-”

Key stepped forward a half-step, interrupting Circuit. “Your dad and I are going to discuss some super-secret Outside techniques for wandering around and finding all the best stuff. We’d let you listen in, but then-” Key’s eyebrows formed an angry expression and his tone grew dark. “I’d have to kill you.” He made a slashing motion across his throat with a forehoof. “Khhhhhk. Very hush hush.” A dramatic pause. Then, with a wink: “Understand?”

“Pfft. If you don’t want me to know, you coulda just *said* so.” The filly huffed her way out of the room accompanied by a fussing Vein.

The foal gone, Key turned to the other stallion. “You’re actually letting her go with you,” he said, a note of disbelief creeping into his otherwise-calm voice.

“Key, she’s going to have to go out at some point. Ore Vein and I talked about it-”

“And she’s okay with this!?”

“Yes, Key.” Circuit stomped a forehoof. “We both do. We’ve thought a lot about this, and we think that if she’s going to start going out at some point, it should be some time when we’re with her and can make sure that she’s all right.”

“YOU WANT TO-” Key looked at the door, then back at Circuit, continuing in a hissing whisper. “You want to send her out there while she’s still young? She- she doesn’t even have her Mark yet, for Celestia’s sake!”

Circuit matched my host’s tone. “And she never *will* if we keep her locked up forever like *you*,” he pointed an accusing hoof at Erratic Key, “seem to *want* to!”

Key inhaled through his nose and began to pace the room, starting to mutter, but increasing in volume as he spoke: “You. Are. Her. Father. Aren’t you supposed to be the one who is completely against this? The overbearing stallion who can’t bear to see his little girl hurt?”

Circuit scoffed. “And aren’t *you* supposed to be the friend and uncle that goes along with me and the decisions that I as the father make?”

“WELL MAYBE WE HAVE THE WRONG ROLES THEN!”

Key must have hit a nerve, because Circuit began glaring daggers at him, causing Key to balk. “Are you really going to bring that up?” His voice was so flat you could have used it as a carpenter’s level.

Key took a step back, cowed by Circuit’s sudden display. “No, I... I’m sorry. I... I’ll go. I’ll see you outside. I just... need to get some things.”

Circuit gave a final snort and left, slamming the door as he left the room.

Key, overcome by emotion, collapsed on the bed and lay there for several minutes. Finally, he gathered his legs underneath himself and rose, moving to the sink. Another pulse of magic and a small shard of glass floated from the rim and into his mane, tucking itself behind his left ear. Preparations complete, Key walked to the door, but glanced back into the room and then down at himself, where I could clearly see-

No. That couldn’t have been what had happened. There’s no way!

But memory orbs are extracted directly from the pony; there’s no way the memory could have been tampered with.

Sitting proudly upon Key’s flank, right where his Cutie Mark should have been, lay a single unbroken key.

Achievements unlocked!

Urban Scout - Enter Downtown

The Reaper is My Copilot - Survive a near-death experience in the Crater

The First Piece - Reveal a secret about yourself to one of your companions

Clockwise notes:

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)! Also give the [Fallout: Equestria Resource](#) a look for even more stuff than I knew existed!