



Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage

Chapter Four: The Merchant

"You make it sound as if it's going to be hard."

I stomped my hoof nervously. We had come to the snow line. Beyond this point, Equestria changed abruptly from a dirty white to a dirty brown. This was dirt and stone... All I had ever known was snow. Even the farmland in Shetland was perpetually covered with snow. Dirt just looked... unnatural.

This was ridiculous! I had nearly died from hypothermia, charged a giant griffin, attacked four heavily armed bandits by myself; and that was just in the last few hours. Now I was freaking out over dirt! This must be how Maple felt; seeing the sky for the first time. Her comment about weakness made so much more sense now. I felt utterly pathetic, being disturbed by something that I knew couldn't hurt me.

Dirt is everywhere, nothing's more natural. You're the weird one Ocher. Just get over it.

I took a deep breath and stepped over the threshold. Dirt was odd. It gave slightly underhoof, but it felt more grainy. It was sort of like walking on a thick layer of flour.

I kicked up a small cloud of dust that I could only describe as smelling 'earthy'. I kind of liked 'earthy'. It mixed beautifully with the sweet pine scent that wafted up from the forests further down the mountain. It reminded me of curling up with somepony in front of a warm fire and devouring a hearty loaf of sourdough bread.

I guess dirt wasn't all that bad.

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"I bucking hate dirt." I grumbled, using one of the knives from the cabin to scrape the built up gunk and slime from my mud caked hooves. I was sitting, soaked, shivering and naked, in a dank cave, next a small fire I had started with a shot from the novasurge pistol and one of the starter logs. "And water, for that matter."

It had started raining less than an hour after we had started down the dirt infested foothills. No, this wasn't rain. This was the sky trying to physically assault us with grape sized pellets of water or, failing that, drown us.

All that sweet smelling, dusty dirt turned into hoof consuming sludge in a matter of minutes. I had practically jumped out of my skin the first time I stepped on a patch of mud and sank up to my forearm. At least I would have if the mud hadn't held me firmly to the ground.

To make matters worse, Maple loved every second of it.

We eventually found a shallow cave in a cliff face and, with much difficulty, I convinced Maple to set up camp till the rain stopped.

"What are you talking about Ocher?" Maple called from where she was sitting on a patch of stone, just outside the cave mouth. "This is amazing."

"You wouldn't be saying that if your barding wasn't waterproof," I assured her. While her armor had proven quite impervious to the sky's assault mine had not fared quite as well. It's weather resistant layer had failed after a mere ten minutes... then its moisture absorbing feature kicked in. What was meant to keep my own sweat from freezing me had instead caused my barding to swell to such sizes that I had to practically waddle into the cave. I had wrung out as much as I could and spread it out on the other side of the fire to dry.

"Sure I would." She said so softly that anypony else would have been unable to discern it over the rain. "This is beautiful..." Her voice drifted off as her eyes followed the rain back to the overcast sky. Her front legs gave out from under her, but she rolled on to her back and kept her eyes locked on the clouds, silently mouthing something over and over again. *'It's just like a ceiling. It's just like a ceiling.'*

I ambled over to her. "Maple are you allr- Hrunng!" Without my barding, my frost burns tore back into my flesh as I got further from the warmth of the fire. I stumbled, but stayed on my hooves. Maple didn't even seem to notice; she remained lost in the rolling storm clouds.

I couldn't get to her; every time I pushed myself forward my injuries got worse. I had to retreat back to the fire, and made sure I had the Thermal on hoof.

She just lay there, staring. Her pin prick pupils slowly widened again as her rhythmic chanting slowed and finally ceased. She was wearing the most serene smile I had ever seen on a sober pony.

She rolled to her hooves and trotted back to the cave entrance, soaked to the bone. "Ocher," She said in a hushed, excited tone as if she had seen some small animal and was afraid she would scare it away. "Look." She activated a lapel flashlight we had found in the survival kit and a hundred faint, rippling rainbows coated the cave mouth.

She had never seen one before had she? The first time I had seen one, I was just a foal. I could remember the sense of utter wonder it evoked in me. To experience that as an adult had to be magical.

"Maple," I waved her over. "Come on, warm up." She looked hesitantly between me and the waves of color dancing across the cave walls. I telekinetically unclipped the light from her vest. "I'll hold it, now get out of the rain." She came over and curled up next to me.

I had to admit, her wonder was contagious. There was a sliver of beauty in this war scarred hell. I could almost feel my mane inflate.

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"It's been six hours Ocher," Maple called from her patch of stone outside the cave. "I don't think it's going to stop raining any time soon."

"But I-" I started to protest.

Maple cut me off. "Those slave ponies don't have forever."

“... Fine,” I grumbled, damn moral fiber. “Let’s at least have breakfast first.”

Maple ambled back inside while I dug through the food section of the survival kit. Let’s see. Freeze dried apples, those looked nice. Some garlic herb crackers, we would need the carbs. Oh, and “hot” cocoa, it would probably be more like cold brown sludge, but I could use the caffeine. Huh? The mug had instructions? Who would need instructions on how to operate a thermos?

‘1) Twist cap ¼ counter clockwise.’

‘2) Wait 30 seconds.’

‘3) Enjoy. (Warning: Hot)’

Okay, quarter turn and-.

“Whoa!” The base of the thermos started glowing orange and I could feel it heating in my hooves. “Maple!” I shouted excitedly. “Look, it heats its self!”

“Of course it does,” she said, looking at me with her head cocked, obviously confused at my excitement. “They have one use heat talismans in the bases.” I decided not to make a snide remark about never seeing a rainbow.

I inhaled my food while running through all the things I could do with the talisman. Emergency heaters for my barding. Fire starters. Impromptu ammunition for my rifle. With enough of them I could even take a hot bath.

“Do your worst wasteland!” I yelled, stepping back out into the downpour. “I have cocoa!”

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When will you learn Ocher? Don’t tempt the blasted hellscape.

It had taken several hours of sloggng through the mire that coated the foot hills, but we managed to reach The Whorl Timber Yard slaver camp by dusk.

We were on a, thankfully, rocky, cliff, overlooking a saw mill, walled with everything from sky buses to fused chunks of scrap metal. An open, garage like building housed a massive conveyor belt with a rack of circular saws; each tooth looked to be the size of my horn. A trio of office bungalows rested against the wall on the other side of the complex. The side facing us was stacked six ponies high with fresh cut trees. A small railroad snaked off to the north, vanishing beyond the tree line.

The entire camp was crawling with slavers. I was able to pick out at least three larger ones wearing scrapper armor with battle saddles equipped with industrial saws and spike rifles. If the group back in 114 was any indication that meant that there were at least twelve other slavers around and possibly a few griffins. This was going to be a problem. Just one scrapper was a match for the two of us.

Five ponies were huddled together in a barbed wire wrapped cage at the heart of the camp; four mares and one stallion. Damn it, I could see that one of the mares was pink, but I couldn’t tell if it was Primrose through the murk.

"What would you do if you could tell?" The arctic voice asked, almost sounding amused. *"What if it wasn't her? You'd have no reason to risk your life."*

It was right. I would have no reason to go. I probably shouldn't even go now, I had a mission to complete. What right did I have to risk the lives of at least 150 ponies for the sake of 5?

"You don't owe these ponies anything. The important thing is that you survive."

"That's right," I said, stepping away from the cliff edge. Maple was staring at me with a mixture of confusion and disappointment. "There's no reason to..."

I heard a scream, barely audible over the downpour. One of the Unity ponies had grabbed a green, earth pony mare from the pen. The scrapper had her bushy, blue tail in his mouth and was dragging her, kicking and screaming, to one of the offices.

Not my problem?! What the hell was I thinking?!

I swung up my rifle and pointed it at the scrapper.

"You only have one shot left," The voice taunted.

"You have no right to talk to me anymore!" I yelled at myself. "You almost made me leave them! I can do this."

"You could also kill the pony you're trying to save."

"I can do this." I lined up the top of the barrel with the scraper's head.

"The beam splits."

"I can do this." My magic flicked off the safety.

"You've missed at a tenth this range."

"I can do this." I took a deep breath through clenched teeth.

"Do you know if the rain will affect the shot?"

"I..."

"Could you live with yourself if you killed her?"

My vision blurred as tears began to well up. "I..." I couldn't do it.

The mare disappeared into the third bungalow.

"DAMN IT!" I screamed as I threw my rifle in the mud at my hooves.

Maple was looking at me nervously. I had that entire argument out loud...

"Ocher..." She said hesitantly. "Are you all right?"

No, I'm not 'all right' you moron! "No." I mumbled. Of all the stupid questions you could ask!

"Okay," She said in a strangely supportive voice. "How about you head back to the cave." She placed her hoof on my shoulder. "I'll come get you when this is over."

"Looks like you're off the hook."

Don't let it provoke you. You're better than this.

"No," I said again, louder this time. "I can handle it. I need to do this. These creatures need to be destroyed so they can't hurt anypony else."

Maple studied my face intently. What would I do if she tried to stop me?

After what felt like an eternity she nodded, apparently satisfied that I wasn't going to go postal in the near future. "Okay," She said, taking her hoof off my shoulder. "But as soon as this is done you're going to take it easy. I'm trained for this, you aren't." She walked back to the overlook and sat down. "So, what's the plan?"

The first thing that came to mind was to charge down, guns blazing and probably die. Not my best idea, all things considered, but I was seething with such hatred (and an odd desire to play cards) that it was difficult to come up with anything else.

Come on Ocher, you're a clever pony, you can do better. Sniping? No, we only had one weapon that could make the shots; my nearly depleted (and now muddy) rifle. Sneak in? Not likely. I was essentially walking in a sponge and I doubted 'subtle' was in Maple's vocabulary. Out flank them? I'd just get the captives caught in the crossfire; or worse yet, used as pony shields.

Maple started fidgeting impatiently. I couldn't say I blamed her; the longer we took the more they could hurt the ponies we were here to save.

ARGH! What could I do?! Lie them out of bondage?

Actually, that wasn't so bad. The Shrikes thought I was a merchant after all and I had always taken a perverse pride in my own deceptions.

I hastily filled Maple in on my new, not suicidal, plan.

"Let me get this straight." Maple said in her 'Pod Ponies are stupid' voice. "So all we need to do find a safe, subtle escape route for one, two, three, four, five," She pointed her hoof at me. "Plus yourself. **Six** ponies! All without letting the slavers figure out you're not a buyer?"

"That's the gist of it." I replied with a halfhearted smirk. "I should have enough to buy them and there were plenty of supplies back at the ski lodge to get them back on their hooves." I shook most of the

mud off my rifle and reholstered it. "We can come back later when we don't have innocents to worry about."

Maple sighed, obviously not happy with this. "If worst comes to worst," She said, opening one of her saddlebags. "We can at least arm them." Inside were the half dozen 15MM, Shrike, hoof cannons we had managed to repair.

I hid my horn under the padded hoofball cap (I'd take any advantage I could get) and started down the hill. This was going to be interesting.

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"What business do you have with The Unity?!" The camp's scrapper gate keeper barked. He was an orange earth pony, a fair bit smaller than the one I had fought in 114.

I'm here to kill you. "I'm here to buy of course," I replied with a pleasant smile.

The scraper looked at me skeptically. "Your reference?" He demanded, holding out a hoof.

Stupid! Of course they need a reference to prevent exactly what we were trying. I started rummaging in my numerous pockets, stalling for time. Think, think, think. A piece of paper brushed against my muzzle.

Ah ha. That should work.

I handed him Ginger Crisps claim note. "I'm here on behalf of a mutual friend."

He studied the note intently, furrowing his brow in concentration. "I really gotta learn to read one of these days." He finally said. "But that's the overseer's signature alright." All his hostility vanished in an instant. "Welcome! How may I help you this evening?"

That was... easy. "I'm in the market for additional household staff," I said in my best imitation of the Unity radio announcer's voice.

"Well, I think we can help you out," He replied as he led us to the cage. "We have four fine specimens right here." The scrapper opened the gate and walked inside. Grabbing the yellow buck by the mane he returned to us. "This one is particularly well trained. He's been in and out of our care for the past six years now." I could believe it, he hadn't even tried to resist.

"Hum..." I rubbed my chin. "He looks promising, but I was hoping for a bulk order."

"Not a problem sir," The scrapper led each our for examination. In addition to the buck there was a lime green unicorn who had been sold by her family to pay off gambling debts, a blue earth pony who was caught 'trespassing' and the pink mare had been 'saved' from a ruined caravan.

I was actually relieved that Primrose wasn't among them. I doubted I could keep this facade if I knew she was being treated like this.

"These look like a good start," I said, pretending to appraise the four in front of me. "but, I was hoping for more."

"More?" He asked, looking confused. "For household use?"

"It's a big house," I replied with a grin. "I saw one of you relocating a fifth one on my way down here."

"You don't want those," He said waving his hoof dismissively.

Those? There was more than one other pony inside. I had to get in. "I'm quite sure I do," I replied, pulling the sack of caps out of my pocket; which had swelled to over 2500 after my skirmish with the Shrikes. He looked back and forth, obviously conflicted. This wouldn't take much. I jingled the bag. "I can make it worth your while."

"You sure?" He asked. "They're used."

Used? USED!? These are ponies you sick son of a bitch! Not furniture! "That's not a problem for what I have in mind." I said in a calm voice, letting my rage turn to cold hatred.

"Yes Sir, I'll bring you to the boss mare immediately."

Boss mare? Overseer Gellwin wasn't here? Damn it!

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He led us into the third bungalow which was apparently reserved for Gellwin and the boss mare. As soon as I entered I could hear soft sobs.

The building seemed to be split into three rooms. A hardwood door on my left had the word 'Overseer' embossed in faded gold leaf; I would need to give that special attention on the return trip. An open room directly ahead of me resembled a well maintained, impromptu lounge. Along the back of the room were a trio of vending machines (Sunrise Sarsaparilla, Sparklecola and a Neighstlé Snacks) between a luxurious couch and a meticulously maintained sofa that resembled a bowl of pillows. Finally the source of the weeping; a simple, metal door to my right with the words 'Management' painted in chipping, black paint and 'Sandstone' carved strait into the steel with a knife.

Our guide hesitantly knocked on the management door.

"WHAT!" A gruff mare's voice bellowed from the room, echoed by a barely audible squeak.

"We have a customer ma'am!" The scrapper halfheartedly yelled back.

"You know the prices!" The mare, who I could only assume was Sandstone, barked. "Why the fuck are you bothering me?!"

"He wants to buy our whole stock! He says the ones in the yard aren't enough!" There was no reply. "He has the caps for it!" The scraper added, almost apologetically.

"Augh!" Heavy hoof steps approached the door.

THAT was a mare?!

A massive, tan earth pony with a blood red mane and eyes stood in the doorway; looking more like a griffin in a pony suit. She was wearing what appeared to be reinforced scrapper armor without the champron, right sabaton or croupiere. "So," She glared down at us with utter contempt and growled. "You want to buy my toys?"

"Yes," I replied as level headily as I could. "I have a large order to fill and caps to burn."

"Suit yourself," She snorted and turned back into the room. Her cutie mark was a blood stained, barbed wire whip. She flicked her tail. Okay, she was technically a mare.

Her room was filled with cubicles stripped of their coating and welded into crude cages filled with piles of straw. Three had ponies in them. The green mare from the pen was curled up and weeping softly into her tail; she was covered in bruises and bleeding from her nose. A filthy, white buck was lying unconscious in a second stall. And the third held a softly breathing, black pegasus.

I could hear Maples teeth grinding and I couldn't blame her. The knowledge that I wouldn't be able to save anypony if I was dead was all that was keeping me from leaping at this... thing.

"You can't have the featherbrain," She said dismissively. "The others are yours for 300 caps, I have no use for them anymore."

Calm, Ocher, calm. Keep it all inside. Their lives depend on it. "Are you sure?" I asked, walking over to the third cage. "I could use a pegasus to get those hard to reach places."

I took a closer look at the ebony mare. Her teal mane was a tangled mess. Her body was coated in a multitude of scrapes and bruises except for her cutie mark (some sort of green target with several lighter green dots). The hair on her inner thighs and tail was matted with blood. The only part of her that seemed unravaged were her wings, which seemed to have been meticulously groomed. Though it was her deep blue eyes that held my attention. She wasn't broken like the buck or green mare; all I saw was rage.

"I'm not going to get a new one soon and I like the feathers," Sandstone replied. "Not selling."

"Really?" I asked walking up next to her. "I have a thousand caps here that say otherwise."

"A thousand?" That peeked her interest.

"Yes, a thousand for immediate purchase. You don't even need to clean her up first."

"Hmm..." Sandstone rubbed her muzzle. I almost had her.

"Just imagine how proud Gellwin will be when she comes back and finds out that you managed to sell out," I pressed. "I know she just acquired a large batch and will need the space."

I caught the hint of a smile. I had just won. She would try to raise the price, but I would counter by offering to waive Ginger Crisp's voucher.

"I suppose I might be able to part with her, but it would be like losing a beloved pet. I couldn't part with her for so little."

Ponies aren't pets, you sick, sadistic scum. "Tell you what," I said, awkwardly putting my foreleg over her shoulder. This would be the most challenging lie I had ever told. "Because I like you," I almost choked on those words. "I'll give you two grand for the lot of them and," I pulled out the slip of paper. "Consider this a gift to the glory of The Unity." I would need a shower after this.

"Done." She extended her unarmored hoof which, on closer inspection, seemed to be flecked with fresh blood and a few green hairs.

I took her soiled hoof, fighting the utter disgust I felt at the thought of touching this creature. "A pleasure doing business with you." Before day break I will reduce you to a pile of smoldering ash. And one day soon I'll rip your overseer's filthy throat out with my bare teeth!

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We left the camp with the slave ponies; the still catatonic, white buck was slung over the yellow one's back. Maple had managed to discreetly reassure each of them of our intentions while feigning to examine their restraints. I was honestly impressed with her restraint. If it weren't for her grinding teeth, I would go as far as to say that she did better than I did.

Nopony said a word until we got back to our overlook.

"Alright." I turned back to the other ponies. "Now you buy your freedom."

"What?!" Maple yelled at me, horrified. "How dare you?!"

"Look!" I snapped back. "Nothing is free! In this world or any other. Any pony who tells you differently is a filthy liar!"

"These ponies have nothing! This is just cruel!"

"Cruel?!" I spun around and pressed my forehead against hers, being careful to not stab her with my horn. "Making them live in my debt is cruel," I hissed. "A debt is like a blade hanging over your neck and something 'free' is even worse. The blade is still there, you just can't see it."

I turned from her. "Now I need payment for my services." The assembled ponies stared at me with a mix of regret and hatred. They'd thank me for this one day. "From each of you, I want one small rock."

All there expressions shifted to utter bewilderment. Maple seemed particularly confused. "You heard me," I said impatiently. "One rock for your freedom, cough them up."

One by one the ex slaves retrieved small stones from the mud and placed them in a small, plastic bag I

had provided. The black pegasus was last. When she approached she threw her stone to the mud and knelt down in front of me.

"I will not pay your trinket," She said in a smooth, authoritative voice. "I cannot be free until my honor is restored."

"Your honor?" I asked. "I just want a rock."

"Yes." She stood and spread her wings. "If you will aid me in destroying that camp and slaying my tormentor I will serve you until you feel I have paid my debt or we encounter an Enclave patrol and a proper reward can be arranged."

"Enclave?" I was very confused.

She saluted. "Lieutenant Echo, communications officer of The Great Pegasus Enclave."

...I was still confused.

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The orange scraper stopped Maple and I at the camp gate. "Sir, I'm going to need you to leave."

"Come now," I replied. "We want to talk with Sandstone again. I have a business arrangement for her."

"I understand," He said apologetically as a black shadow floated down behind him. "The boss is sleeping and I-" He cut off with a gurgle and collapsed to the floor. Two long cuts ran across his neck from ear to ear; coating Maple and I with arterial spray. I almost felt bad for him; of all the psychopaths I had encountered he had the best manners.

Echo was hovering behind him, holding a scavenged straight razor in each fetlock and a carving knife in her mouth. Barely wasting a second, she shot back up into the sky, becoming just another patch of black in the rolling storm clouds.

One of the other slaver's E.F.S. tag shifted to red. "What the-"

I swung up my beam rifle, entered S.A.T.S. and sent my last beam through her throat.

Fizt

Dropping the spent weapon (I would get it later.) I pulled out the novasurge pistol and put two bolts of white hot magic into the gasping mare's chest.

Pew! *Pew!*

Behind me, Maple opened up with the Grim Harvest as more of the white tags turned red.

RATATATATAT!

I ran to the logs for cover, firing my pistol's agonizingly slow projectiles in the general direction of the slavers. A buck shrieked behind me. Got one.

The red bars on my E.F.S. vanished one by one as the Unity raiders fell. Consumed by clouds of lead from Maples saddle, sliced to ribbons by one of Echo's dive bomb attacks or cooked alive by one of my poorly aimed shots. We were wining. Aside from a few grazes we were unscathed. The enemy had been reduced to less than half their numbers in a matter of seconds.

"Not used to fighting ponies who can defend themselves are you?!" I yelled across the camp. "How do you like it w- Ugh!" My cover violently shifted, knocking me over and pinning my hind legs under it.

The second scrapper, a purple unicorn (I had given up guessing the walking tanks' genders), had simultaneously activated the saw house's conveyor belt and kicked me onto it. I swung my pistol around and shot at the controls. With a crackle and a hiss the control box was reduced to glowing slag.

The conveyor belt sped up. Shit! I just made things worse.

The scraper cackled and wrenched at my pistol. I desperately tried to hold on, but its telekinesis was far stronger than mine and I lost my last weapon. The armored unicorn stood next to me on the belt, grinning with satisfaction. This sick scum was willing to leave its comrades to die just so it could watch my face as I awaited my doom.

I needed help. I was going to be shredded. I began charging a flash bang, I doubted it would have much effect on my captor, but it might attract Maple or Echo's attention. The saws began to cut into the log that was pinning me. No time to charge. I pooled as much magic as I could and unleashed it in a beam straight up.

The scraper yelled and stumbled. The moron had been staring me in the face when I set off my spell. I heard the clang of metal on metal.

Oh, you stupid bastard.

In its daze, the scrapper had backed into the safety railing, not three hooves away from the spinning saws. I gently reached out with my magic and grabbed hold of its maroon tail. It turned its head, realising what I was doing an instant too late. I jammed the tail into the machinery.

"NO!" The scraper shrieked; it was a buck. "I'm not supposed to die!" He fell to the ground, trying desperately to hook his hooves on something. "Goddess! Redeye! Mother! Help me! Somepony! Please!" The saws were less than a hoof from his flank. He held out his hooves to me, staring at me pleadingly.

"He deserves no mercy," The cynical pony in my head piped up.

And he shall have none. I clenched my eyes shut.

The sound of his screams mixed with the high pitched whine of shredding metal, groan of straining

gears and a wet tearing as he was consumed by the machine. The machinery ground to a halt, as somewhere a belt or drive shaft let go, the saws unable to force their way through the balled up remains of the scrapper's armor.

I managed to wiggle out from under what was left of the log. A ragged breath came from the ruined saw house. The machine had stopped working about half way through the scrapper's chest. The sight was enough to make me lose what was left of my lunch.

"Leave him. Its what he would do."

"Yes he would," I said, retrieving my pistol from where the scrapper had dropped it and wiping my mouth. "But I'm better than he is." I walked over to him and pressed the gun to his temple. "And now he knows it."

Pew!

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Echo bucked open the door of the first bungalow so Maple and I could fill it with light and lead.

BLAM! *RATATATATAT!* *BLAM!*

This building was only divided into two rooms. It had apparently been an office space of some sort. Solid steel desks were scattered about; some of which were coated with blankets, sleeping bags and pillows to make impromptu beds. A padlocked door stood to our left with 'Janitor' painted on it. In and amongst the furniture were seven, well armed raiders; two of which had been blown away in our opening volley.

These slavers were ready for us. They had pulled several of the desks together to form a barricade. No sooner had we slain their two comrades than they opened up on us with several automatic weapons.

We dove for cover behind desks of our own.

"I need my gear!" Echo yelled over the din of gunfire, dropping her knife. She swooped down next to me. "They keep it in the janitor's closet!" She pointed one of her razors at the door.

Maple would need to pick the lock. Damn, No desks for cover. If she tried something that complex she would be torn apart. While I had never actually seen her pick a lock, I doubted time would stop for her and even a few seconds could be fatal. Cover. Cover. Where could I find cover?

Maple's E.F.S. signal started slowly moving across the room.

"Maple!" I yelled. "Don't d-" My jaw dropped.

She had crawled into her desk's hoof well and was lifting the entire thing on her back like a turtle shell. Goddesses, how was such a small pony so strong?

The Maple-turtle was slowly making its way across the room, bullets pinging off it constantly. Despite her seemingly inequine strength she was obviously struggling with each step. I could see the sweat rolling down her neck and the strain in her tensed, well toned... No! Bad Ocher! We are fighting now. Argh! I would need to talk to her about this before I got somepony killed.

We provided cover fire for our encumbered comrade; Echo proving to be about as inept with firearms as I was. The 15mm cannons actually had some luck penetrating our enemies' cover, despite Echo's horrid aim. One of the slavers shrieked as a stray bullet punched through the desk and buried its self in her chest. Four to go.

Maple finally made it to the closet. Pulling out a screwdriver with her fetlock and a hairpin with her teeth she began to fiddle with the lock.

"Got it!" Maple yelled to us, not thirty seconds after she started.

Echo immediately dropped her pistol and bolted for the closet. Maple had barely gotten the door unlatched when the black streak shouldered through and slammed it behind her.

From the brief glance I had gotten, the closet was full of a nearly comical mixture of cleaning supplies and tools of war. Mops, brooms and spears were lined up across the back wall between two buckets, one holding sponges and the other kitchen knives. A set of coveralls and a floral shirt flanked a suit of scrapper armor in a corner cabinet. The shelves on the side walls were coated with a mixture of small fire arms and boxes of detergent.

"What now?!" Maple yelled.

"Keep shooting!" I suggested, shrugging. Whatever Echo had planned, she had better get it done quickly. I was running low on magic cells for my pistol and the slavers' concentrated fire was swiftly eating through Maple's cover.

One of the raider's tags started moving from cover. I peeked over my desk to see this new target; a lone, amber mare with bloodshot eyes, carrying a sledgehammer in her teeth. I floated my pistol to my eye and entered S.A.T.S. Two to the chest and one to the head. My first shots left smoldering patches of half melted skin on her breast and the third ignited her black mane, wreathing her whole head in flames. What had been going through her head?

Oh crap.

The burning mare hadn't fallen, she hadn't even slowed down. I was stuck out in the open until S.A.T.S. wore off, and she was moving far faster than she should have been able to in slowed time.

S.A.T.S. dropped just in time for me to avoid a fatal blow to the head. I wasn't so lucky on her back swing. She caught me square in the shoulder with a sickening crunch as her hammer forced my bones into unnatural angles.

With a gasp I collapsed to the floor, cradling my dislocated shoulder. The hammer-mare stood over me, sledge raised high. She flashed me a horrific, skeletal grin through her melting face.

BLAM! *BLAM!*

One of the burning slaver's hind legs blew off in a spray of half cooked flesh and gore a split second before Maple knocked her to the floor with a full body tackle. The mares rolled across the floor in a tangle of thrashing hooves, snapping teeth and crackling flame. I slowly crawled across the ground, searching for my pistol: any other weapon and I would just as likely kill Maple as help her.

The raider had managed to slip behind Maple, sinking her teeth into the back of Maple's neck and igniting her mane. Instead of attempting to shake the raider off, Maple reared up and fell back onto the desk I had been using for cover. The raider's decaying teeth shattered under the full weight of the security mare. The maneuver had left bleeding gashes across Maples neck, but completely destroyed the raider's jaw and seriously damaged her, now visible, skull.

For the love of Luna! The raider rose shakily to her remaining hooves; her lower jaw little more than splintered shards of bone held together by sinew. Boiling blood was pouring from what had once been her ears, eyes and nose. What did it take to kill this thing?!

Maple obviously shared my feelings, as she stumbled away with a look of utter horror.

Ah ha! I had found my gun sticking out of a waste bin under the desk. Floating it out, I entered S.A.T.S. again and cued three shots on the 'Unity Berserker'. Let's see you get up without a head.

Pew! *Pew!* *Pew!*

My first shot went wide, searing the ceiling. The second struck the berserker square in the mouth enveloping her completely in a field of destructive magic. In an instant the seemingly indestructible creature had been reduced to a glowing, green puddle. S.A.T.S., apparently as concerned as I was that she may still be alive somehow, fired the last shot into the still quivering slime.

Maple was panting heavily and seemed completely drained, a steady trickle of blood flowed from her ragged neck wounds. She just slumped down against one of the desks, completely oblivious to her still smoldering mane. I quickly pulled out a bottle of water and dumped it over her head to extinguish her mane and pressed my last regeneration potion to her lips. She didn't even react to her dousing, but I was able to coax her into drinking the potion.

The other raiders seemed just as shocked by the berzerker's display as we were and had ceased firing.

This was worrying. One moment Maple was a superheroine straight out of Sword Mares and nearly catatonic the next.

A message popped up on my E.F.S.

'>E.F.S. coordinating signals...'

The compass bar vanished from the bottom of my E.F.S. and a small, dark green circle with a white triangle in the center popped up in the upper right corner. No, no, no! Not the E.F.S.! I couldn't lose my E.F.S.!

'>Stand by.'

Smaller, light green lines filled the circle. They looked suspiciously like desks. Had I somehow relocated my map feature?

'>Systems synchronized.'

Two white dots and three red ones appeared on the disk. This was my E.F.S.; only better. How did that happen?

'>Radial targeting engaged.'

I caught sight of something flying through the air out of the corner of my eye. It almost looked like a green, metal apple without a stem. The apple sailed behind the slaver desk fort followed by screams as the slavers desperately tried to climb over their cover.

FWOOM!

With a crackling boom the entire back half of the room was engulfed in a blinding dome of emerald energy. All the red dots on my improved E.F.S. immediately vanished.

The raiders and their desks had been fused into a single semisolid mass. It was like some form of grotesque, technicolor, clay sculpture. I had trouble telling where flesh ended and steel began.

"Clear," Echo called from the closet.

She was wearing a military uniform consisting of a black undershirt, a tan double breasted jacket and a grey cap with a star ringed 'E' on it. She had discarded her straight razors in favor of a belt of combat knives, and what resembled a large kitchen knife made of some sort of light blue metal. She had also braided a crescent blade made out of the same blue metal into the end of her tail.

"What **was** that?" I asked, breathing heavily.

"My last magic energy grenade," she replied as if it were the most natural thing in Equestria.

I stared at her bemused. Was the entire outside world so twisted that not knowing about a flesh melting, magic apple was considered unusual? Were there even enough decent ponies out here to help us save the Stable?

If it wasn't for Blossom... I would have been recycled.

I was honestly starting to doubt there were that many decent ponies in the Stable either.

Maple moaned and shuddered. Argh! Ocher you dolt! Pull yourself together.

"Did you happen to find any medical supplies in there?" I asked hopefully.

Echo stared off into space, moving her eyes as if she were scanning down a list and blinking irregularly. "Nothing you would want to use," She finally said. "There are no safety regulations down here and most of the stuff in there was made recently. It would just as likely kill you as it would help"

"That explains a lot," Maple said in little more than a ragged whisper. "Buck usually doesn't take this much out of me."

I looked over to where she had dislodged the desk and sure enough, there was an empty medicine bottle with 'Buck' mouthwritten in black marker and a crude drawing of pills on a white label. "You took a full bottle of suspicious pills in..." I was going to finish with 'our situation', but that failed to convey the sheer stupidity of her decision. "ever?" I asked, stunned. I thought she had more sense than that. Steroids were dangerous at the best of times; there was a reason I never stocked them.

"I used my last Stable dose at the ski lodge," she replied, struggling to get back to her hooves. "I couldn't think of any other way to get to the door." She laughed weakly as she collapsed back into my lap. "Sorry."

I... You... But... Celestia damn it to the moon. Now I felt like the inconsiderate one. "Its okay," I sighed. "Here, let me help you."

I carefully slid under her, using my magic to keep some of the weight off her wobbly legs. With her barrel resting on the small of my back I dropped my spell and stood up. "Ungh!" I grunted under her full weight. What was this pony made of? Solid stone?

Echo was still flipping thorough her invisible list as I hobbled from one desk-bed to the next trying to find one that wasn't melted, painted in gore, coated in serrated bits of metal or so foul that I felt infected just looking at it. By the third one I was utterly exhausted and my shoulder was not making things any easier, essentially limiting me to three legs. "Why did I think I could do this?" I mumbled to myself.

"You tried," Maple said, softly patting my head. "Just put me down facing the door and reload my saddle." I gently set her down on the cleanest spot of floor I could locate. "You can come pick me up when you're done. I'll just be busy." She yawned. "Napping."

"No!" Echo yelled frantically, snapping back to reality. "Don't let her go to sleep!"

I immediately started lightly tapping her with my hoof. "No, no, no," I said. "Stay awake now, we still have work to do." I turned to Echo. "Why can't she sleep?"

"I don't know what they did while making the drug," She replied, going back to her invisible screen. "But if it's from the same batch I found in the closet she might not wake up again."

Not wake up again?! I shook Maple violently. "No you can't sleep, you... er..." What sort of things did security do? "You have a patrol." I said with as much authority as I could muster. "Now on your hooves officer!"

"Yes ma'am," Maple said almost as if it was more of a reflex than a choice. She put a hoof around my intact shoulder and hauled herself up, using me as a crutch.

"Is there anything we can do?" I asked Echo.

"I could mix something together to counteract the chemical in her body," she replied, paying attention to the real world again. "But I'm not a doctor, so what I cook up may be more toxic than the Buck." She made an interesting motion that I could only describe as shrugging her wings.

Echo flapped over to Maple and I. "Her best chance would be to wait it out. Sandstone always keeps some Fixer in her office. That should help keep her conscious until the drug flushes out of her system."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure she has what we need?" If not, I was making my way back to the ski lodge, I knew there was safe medicine there.

"Yes," Echo replied. "She would frequently get hangovers and needed it when we..." She trailed off and absent mindedly rubbed her hind legs together.

That was worrisome. "Um, Echo," I said.

"Anyway." She snapped back to reality. "Yes she has what we need and we should retrieve it as soon as possible. I assume you noticed the upgrades I made to your targeting system."

"You did that?" I asked, looking her up and down. "Where is your PipBuck?" Was she keeping it in her tail braid?

"No I don't, but I have a cut down version built into my headgear."

"A Pip... hat?" I asked hesitantly. She nodded. "...Okay then."

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We stood outside the management bungalow. The rain was doing a world of good for Maple's condition. Just being out in it seemed to revitalize her, but not enough for me to let her fight. This was going to be a problem. Echo was the only one of us in any shape to fight and even she hadn't fully recovered from her captivity. Every other scrapper we had taken down took at least two of us or a good number of cheap tricks.

"There are no 'cheap tricks'," my arctic delusion said condescendingly. "You do whatever you must to live or you die." Wonderful, my own stress was talking down to me. Celestia I wanted a good drink! Hell, I might even settle for spirits at this point.

I floated my beam rifle from the mud and reloaded it. I had managed to locate one full microspark cell and a half full one in the closet. It wasn't much, but at least it was something. I doubted I would be using the novasurge pistol again anytime soon, not after that berserker fiasco.

Echo, armed with a pair of her knives, hovered at the door, nodded to us and then bucked it open. A tan and grey mass plowed into the pegasus, making her flail to remain aloft.

Sandstone was wearing her full suit of reinforced armor made all the more intimidating by a

massive, metal helmet forged from a wrought iron fence to resemble the jaws of some deep sea fish. She had huge, jagged, steel blades built into her sabatons, two unpainted grenades and a pair of rail rifles on her saddle. She was holding something between her clenched teeth. A jet black feather, far too large to have come from any bird.

Echo righted herself and flicked her fetlocks, hurtling both of her blades at Sandstone's chest. Regrettably, the knives bounced off the scrapper boss' thick, metal armor and fell to the mud harmlessly.

Sandstone released an almost primal howl of rage and responded with a volley from her rifles, narrowly missing the erratically moving flier.

Echo quickly swooped back at Sandstone, half jumping and half gliding. She stopped just short of running face first into the slaver boss' jagged hoof, pirouetting and whipping her tail blade across the slaver's lightly armored underbelly. The armored juggernaut reared and shrieked as the blade slipped between two of her armor plates; opening her belly from leg to leg, just below her ribs.

Sandstone flailed ineffectively at the raven pegasus darting around her. Using her wings to flit and spin from hind leg to hind leg in tight circles around her opponent, Echo seemed to be dancing as much as she was fighting. The slaver swung her vicious hoof blades at the Enclave mare's neck, but Echo simply ducked under the blow and jammed one of the combat knives under her opponent's foreleg. She left the blade in the wound, allowing Sandstone to drive it in deeper as she frantically tried to catch her far more agile foe.

I felt rather helpless, just sitting in the mud as our new companion slowly sliced the titanic mare to pieces. Both Maple and I both lacked the precision weapons or sharp shooting skills needed to outmaneuver the pegasus and avoid hitting her.

Nearly every seam on the scraper boss' armor had become a bleeding lesion and at least half a dozen knives were sticking out of her joints. If we hadn't just fought a creature that had kept moving after nearly being reduced to a skeleton it would have been astonishing that she was still alive, let alone still fighting.

Crack!

"Know your place!" Sandstone bellowed, catching Echo with a lucky backhoof. "You feathered cunt!"

The black pegasus was sent bouncing across the mud like a rag doll. As soon as she was clear, Maple and I opened fire on the wounded scrapper. My rifle proved to be utterly useless; its beams managing to do little more than scorch small pits in Sandstone's armor. Maple was nearly as ineffective, only a few shots out of her swarm of bullets managed to penetrate the softer joints and seams of Sandstone's armor. At least we had gotten her attention.

Echo was curled up in the fetal position where she had fallen, trembling and slowly rubbing her hind legs together. She was cradling her face where Sandstone's serrated hoof claws had left ragged tears across her cheek. This looked bad, if she was out of the fight Maple and I were doomed. We stood little chance against the raider in our condition.

Sandstone advanced on us menacingly. "I'll fuck you to death with your own horn, you treacherous, little shit!" she barked. "But first I'm gonna make you eat that lying tongue of yours."

She was almost on us. Well, here goes nothing. I started releasing rapid flashes from my horn and charged for her stomach wound, my shoulder screaming at me every time I put weight on it. If I got my horn inside her I might be able to stop her heart like I had with the Shrike griffin's.

Sandstone batted me away with a practically effortless hoof swipe. The jarring impact made my vision blur and her claws dug deep gouges in my scalp. With my world spinning I landed face first in the mud. As I tried to rise I felt a weight slam into the back of my head, forcing my entire muzzle below the surface. I strained against the force, but it just kept forcing me deeper under. My lungs burned. I was still dazed from the scraper's blow and couldn't concentrate enough to perform even the simplest spells.

Suddenly, the weight lifted. I pulled my head out of the muck and opened my mouth to suck in sweet, fresh air. The force slammed back into the base of my skull, forcing my entire head under the surface. I sucked in a disgusting mixture of mud and gore. I spasmed as my lungs violently rejected the sludge I had attempted to fill them with.

Boom

I was barely hanging on the edge of consciousness when the burden keeping me under vanished with a muffled thud. I strained to rise, but between my wounded shoulder and the slime in my throat I didn't have the strength. Damn, I was going to die and we had just won.

Something grabbed hold of my mane and yanked me upright. I immediately doubled over and coughed up mud. It felt like an eternity before I could breath freely again. No matter how much I hacked up there always seemed to be more.

Clearing the sludge from my eyes I saw that Maple had managed to hobble over and pull me up. Sandstone was lying in the mud next to us, still twitching but very dead. Her barrel had been blown open from the inside, forcing the metal armor to twist into even more gagged shapes and almost weave together with her ruined ribcage.

Echo was lying on her back in the mud about 30 hooves away with one of the metal apple stems clenched between her teeth.

*** *** ***

The sun's glow was shining, dully through the thick cloud cover and rapidly dwindling rain by the time we pulled ourselves back together.

I cracked open another mug of cocoa to stave off exhaustion and to wash the revolting taste of mud out of my mouth. The warm thermos between my hooves did wonders, taking my mind off my waterlogged barding, traumatized companions, crippling injuries, fake life and all around depressing situation. This was it. This is what would keep me alive out here. The little things like a hot cup of chocolate or a rainbow on a cave wall.

"You are pinning your hope on a beverage?" my imaginary adviser asked.

"Quiet you... me... whatever you are," I snapped back, careful to keep my voice down. "I've given you your crazy time, now you will give me my cocoa time."

"She keeps the drugs next to her bed; the process will take some time," Echo said rubbing her hind legs together. "I am going to scavenge the last building. It was their mess hall and I might be able to find something useful." With that she left us at the door.

We managed to find the fixer, along with a good deal of other 'safe' medicine, in a medical box resting next to Sandstone's bed. Before I did anything else I made sure Maple took one of the fixer tablets and sat her down in Gellwin's couch-nest.

"Echo said it should take a few hours for you to work through the buck," I told her, floating out a few magazines that had been lying next to the table, and a bag of potato chips from the snack machine. (There was a disclaimer on the bag. 'Not to be used in muffins.' Who would need that?). "So, sit, read, eat and I'll be back when I'm done searching this place."

"I feel fine," she protested.

"But you aren't," I said flatly. "I did a flip through of the medical book from the cave and it said that fixer just masks a problem, it doesn't get rid of it."

"I don't like being useless," she grumbled through a mouthful of chips.

If **she**, of all ponies, was useless then what did that make me? "You're not," I told her a bit more sharply than I had intended.

I doubled over from the sudden strain on my lungs and coughed up a mass of dirt filled phlegm. Smooth Ocher, real smooth.

I shook myself and wiped my mouth to regain my composure. "You saved my life when you shouldn't have even been able to move," I continued. "But if you want to do something productive," I floated the medical journal out of my bag. "Flip through this. At least one of us should know how to put a pony back together."

My own injuries required little more than a bit of telekinetic bone shifting and a health potion. I shifted my shoulder into its socket with a horrific pop that brought tears to my eyes and downed a regeneration potion.

"All right then," I said, struggling to sound confident through the throbbing ache in my leg. "Let's see what Gelwin kept in her office."

A message popped up on my E.F.S..

'>New signal found.'

The ear splitting static channel had been labeled with some alphanumeric butchering of the equestrian language. Eh, what was the worst that could happen?

As if on cue, the cynical pony in my head started up. *"It could b-"*

"Zip it." I quietly cut him off. "I wasn't asking you."

I fiddled with my PipBuck's dials until I had this new channel selected. Much to my delight I wasn't deafened by static. Instead an excited and decidedly self satisfied buck's voice howled at me. *"Hellllooo chillldren, this is DJ-Pon3, OOOOW! I'll be bringing the truth to all you good ponies up north round Flankorage for the next day or so. Lets start with some news. Apparently a traveling merchant, coming down from the southern mountains, had enough of being ambushed on the road. So what did he do about it? Well that's what I'm here for kiddies. He marched himself right to The Shrikes nest at the Coltinvill Ski Lodge and cleaned out the whole mess of them."*

I was stunned. How could he know that? Was I being followed? Did somepony have me in their sniper sights right now? Agh, never mind that for the moment; I was on the radio.

"Did our little northern hero stop there?" he continued. Me? A hero? I couldn't help, but imagine The Mighty Marshmallow Pony again. *"No ma'am, he did not. Last I heard he was assaulting one of Red Eye's camps. Good on ya Merchant, keep fighting the good fight. We're all rootin for ya. Now here is Sweetie Belle, bringing you the great truth of the wastes..."* A sweet, melodious voice flowed from my earbloom. It mixed beautify with the cozy heat of the cocoa. If I closed my eyes I could almost imagine myself back at the Shetland tavern, curled next to the fire and swapping rumors and wild fantasies with my friends.

I was practically giddy. I was a hero; the radio said so. I even had an alias; The Merchant. It was simple, accurate, yet foreboding; if said in the right context. 'Ocher Bullion, The Merchant! Savior of Ponies and Slayer of Monsters!' My own smug satisfaction was nearly palpable. And on top of it all they were playing my favorite song. All things considered, this hadn't been that bad a night.

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: Scoundrel 1 -- You can use your wily charms to influence people - each rank raises your Speech and Barter skills by 5 points.

New Companion Perk: Echo Location -- By coordinating the targeting systems of your E.F.S. with Echo's you can determine the distance of threats as well as direction.

This is a story based off the magnificent work of Kkat ([Fallout Equestria](#))

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