



## Fallout Equestria: Operation Flankorage

### Chapter Two: Cold Trail

*"Now what do we do?... Panic?"*

Now it was my turn to be stoic. I gazed in wonder at the massive valley below me, all the while Maple kept her eyes glued to the sky. Her knees buckled as she turned the most interesting shade of teal.

"Whu... whu... whu." Maple gasped out between ragged breaths. "Where's the ceiling?" Her pupils were quivering pinpricks and her coat started matting to her skin with half frozen sweat.

I spared a glance at the rolling curtain of cloud above us. What was she on about? There is no ceiling outside. Outside, she had never been outside had she? "I... um... officer." I mumbled. What was I supposed to do? I managed to make myself utterly useless for the next five minutes simply watching Maple try to pull herself back together. She finally managed to get back on her hooves, keeping her eyes locked on the snow.

"Let's go." She groaned, slowly shuffling away from 114.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked lamely.

"No, I'll handle it." She replied, briefly glancing up at me and almost immediately locking her eyes back on her hooves. I managed to hear her mutter something under her breath. Something I obviously wasn't meant to hear. "I can't afford to be weak now."

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The trek down the mountain was slow going as I was feeling particularly... sluggish and the random muscle spasms weren't helping. On the up side, I wasn't feeling all that cold anymore. I was more numb than anything else.

A little, stylized unicorn in the upper right corner of my E.F.S. had been slowly turning from white to blue, save for it still blinking foreleg, with a little number underneath going down. I had honestly paid little attention to it until a large a warning appeared under it.

*'>SEVERE HYPOTHERMIA WARNING!'*

*'>CORE TEMPERATURE 82 DEGREES!'*

Smaller warnings about mild starvation, dehydration, blood loss and exhaustion popped up around it. I wasn't a medical pony, but I guessed that probably wasn't good for me. While I was usually quite proud of my reasoning skills, I sadly had to admit that, at that moment, I probably wouldn't have figured out there was a problem without the flashing, red letters pointing it out.

"Um, Officer Sugar," I said weakly. "I think I may have a problem."

"Not now," She snapped, still very carefully watching her hooves. "The sooner we get down this mountain the better."

"Yeah, I know," I replied with a bit of a slur. "But my PipBuck'sss rather n'sistent it's a problem now." 81 degrees, my vision was starting to blur.

"Okay, fine, let's see what's wrong with you." She said, turning towards me, careful to keep her eyes at shoulder height. "Oh, sweet Celestia!"

"Huh?" I followed her eyes to my bare legs and chest. Going naked, save for a saddlebag, into a tundra probably hadn't been my brightest decision. The patches of hairless hide I had created removing my uniform, as well as the ones leftover from my recent bullet wounds, were looking slightly yellow and waxy. Funny, I would have thought that sort of thing would hurt more, but they were actually the least achy part of my body. I jabbed one with a shivering hoof... I felt nothing. "He he, would you look at that." I said, continuing to poke the yellow patches. Things didn't seem so bad anymore, kind of amusing actually. 80 degrees.

"Stop that!" She yelled, pushing my hoof away. "We need to get you somewhere warm, quickly!"

"Okie dokie loki." I giggled, feeling quite euphoric. "But I'm feeling a bit foalish in the walking department." I snickered "So I'm gonna be ssslow." My vision was really starting to go. "And you can't change that by getting all... bendy."

My legs collapsed under me.

\*Thud\*

Everything went white.

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The first thing I felt was... warmth, I was warm. Warm and not slimy. Was I dead? Had everything been a dream? I shifted slightly. Ouch, nope, not dead, not dreaming. All the blissfully numb patches now felt like they were full of rusted cheese graters. I vaguely remembered hitting the snow, not the pleasantly brisk, fluffy, white stuff from Shetland, but the outside world's life sapping, brittle, grey sheets. Next, there was a sensation of flying and then curling up to something warm and soft, but that was about it.

After conjuring a small forehead lamp I found myself curled in a filthy sleeping bag, a soft howling echoing around me, interrupted only by an occasional drip. Hesitantly, I magically fumbled for the zipper and opened it enough to look out. The gust of cold air forced my eyes shut immediately. Well, now I knew it was still cold out and I had no desire to repeat my mistake, this would be interesting.

I opened my eyes slowly as they acclimated to the cold. I was in a cave. A surprisingly well lit cave with luminescent fungus coating the walls. There was a dying fire to my left surrounded by rusted pots and my saddlebags, a natural ramp extended ahead with a few beams of daylight sneaking in. A two headed cow-thing with a large, empty pack saddle was frozen into the wall on my right. No sign of Maple though.

Being very careful to avoid the fire pit, as it would be ironically unpleasant to be frozen and set on fire in the same day, I rolled around to see the other end of the cave. No Maple, but there was a tunnel leading further down and a large, hardcover book lying open in a corner with little slips of paper poking out.

Slowly, but surely, I wormed my way over to the book, unwilling to leave my toasty, albeit filthy, cocoon. I caught my reflection in one of the shinier pots and I looked utterly ridiculous. A massive, burnt marshmallow with two yellow eyes and a glowing horn peeking out, flopping across the floor. If it were anypony else I probably would have toppled over laughing and now I really had a hankering for s'mores.

The book was opened to a page labeled 'Frostbite-Treatment' with several entries underlined; 'Shared body heat', 'Hot water bath' and 'Wrapping in blankets', as well as one section circled several times, 'For severe cases, apply Thermal'. I flipped the book shut, 'Canterlot Journal of Internal Medicine, Volume III'. I was going to leave the heavy tome, but then I caught sight of the recommended price. '3,800 Bits'. "MIIINE!" My voice cracked, in an unfortunately filly like pitch, while I tried to magically shove the book past my face and into the sleeping bag.

I had three options at that point. I could wiggle my way back outside and try to find help on my own... As The Mighty Marshmallow Pony! Not very likely. Option two, I could sit by, read my new book and mull over how to repay whoever brought me here, probably Maple. Finally, I could go sleeping bag spelunking.

Well, the smart thing to do would be wait and brush up on my first aid. While I usually prided myself for being a smart pony, I needed to find Maple. I couldn't explain it, but I felt particularly vulnerable without her. That and I didn't do debts.

Magic beam rifle, ready. Satchels, wedged in the sleeping bag. Microspark cells, in depressingly short supply. I had everything I could think of. "Marshmallow Pony, away."

\*Thud\*

I rolled myself back to an upright position, rubbing my aching snout. "Away more slowly then."

I fell on my snout for the third time in the span of a minute having barely made it out of the entrance chamber. This was not working, I was just going to have to pony up and explore in my birthday suit, fun.

As soon as the sleeping bag came off I regretted it. My frost burned patches throbbed, the cheese graters slowly turning into chainsaws, ripping into me with every breath and motion. I collapsed gasping and clutching the largest patch on my chest. The pain slowly started to fade as the dangerously comforting numbness returned and my Pipbuck's cartoon avatar became light blue. I was going to need to be quick about this, otherwise I'd freeze to death.

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"Stupid pony!" I cursed myself as I ran for my life through the twisting caverns. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

I had only recently shed my sleeping bag when I heard something snuffling in a nearby chamber. Since it could have been Maple and I didn't have the sense to check my E.F.S. I trotted in and called through my chattering teeth. "Anypony in here?" The only response I got was a low growl. A lanky, grey furred dog padded up to me, arching its back, its fur bristling.

I had always liked dogs. The ones that the farm ponies back in Shetland, no I corrected myself, back in Stable 114 kept always made me smile. Obviously this feral creature with the bright red E.F.S. tag would be just as loving and reassuring as the simulated pets back home, smart pony indeed. I reached out a hoof to pet its matted fur.

The dog's jaws closed around my foreleg, just above the PipBuck, and started tearing at my flesh. Instinctively, I blasted it in the face with a flare, it whimpered, but did not let go. I triggered SATS and targeted the 'wolf', okay it was a wolf not a dog, and prepped two shots on its face. SATS timed out, I couldn't confirm the target, I wasn't about to kill some murdering rapist ransacking my home, I was about to kill a puppy that probably hadn't eaten in days.

Another chomp on my leg, this one accompanied by a blinking warning on my E.F.S., convinced me that I needed to do something. Flipping the beam rifle around I used it like a club to dislodge the wolf. As soon as I was free I took off at a gallop.

"Stupid pony!"

Left. Left. Right, or was that supposed to be left, right, left? My breath was coming in sharp gasps, the combine strain of running in the cold and telekinetically keeping my mauled leg from giving out exhausted me. The wolf was practically nipping at my flanks and on top of everything else; I had gotten myself completely lost in the labyrinthine tunnels. I couldn't keep running, I'd eventually drop from exhaustion and be an easy meal.

Maybe I could get it to leave me alone if I zapped a paw. I swung my rifle around, lined up a shot on its front leg with S.A.T.S. and released.

\*Fizt\*

The needle thin red beam struck the wolf's paw and completely engulfed the creature, reducing it to a pile of softly glowing ash in the span of a second.

I dropped the rifle and just stared, my pistol back home had never done anything like that. "I... I didn't mean to." I managed to stammer out. I had to wonder what it said about my character, when I had a harder time killing a wolf than a pony.

I could vaguely hear an icy voice scoff. "*Wolves don't have things you want.*"

No, I had a harder time killing a hungry animal than a sadistic monster. It makes complete sense.

I scooped up my weapon and trudged ahead. Live now, wallow later.

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I wandered aimlessly around the caverns for what felt like hours. I had to pick up my rifle with my mouth when my telekinesis became incapable of both keeping me on my hooves and carrying my weapon. My blood had frozen to my skin, sealing my wounds, but spreading my frost burn even further. Turning a corner, I bumped into something rather out of place in a cave.

A large chariot trailer with the faded image of a trippant pony silhouette carrying a box on its back, had been wedged across the tunnel. It had been very heavily reinforced, with thick, metal plates riveted, welded and even taped to the faded hull. The back doors had been replaced with a cheap imitation of the hatches I had seen in the stable, complete with an antiquated terminal. Some sort of poor pony's Stable? That would mean it could have medicine, clothes, food or even help.

I trotted up to the terminal; this one was not kind enough to open just because I got close. I had fiddled with computers before and while I was far from skilled, I did know some of the rudimentary points of password recovery. The terminal had obviously been used some time in the past 200 years as the keyboard was considerably cleaner than the rest of the machine. Somepony might be inside now, what luck.

*"Just hope they don't mind you breaking into their home."*

That was actually a very good point; I just wished it hadn't come from some douchey voice in my head. I spat out my gun and yelled. "Anypony home?!" While pounding my uninjured hoof against the door. Nothing, ether nopony was home or they were planning to take my head off as soon as I opened the hatch. So much for being polite.

I planted my rump in front of the console and flicked on the interface. My PipBuck beeped at me. It had wirelessly opened some sort of emergency access program on the terminal. A mass of gibberish filled the screen with a handful of four letter words scattered throughout. I supposed multiple choice would be a fare bit easier than random guessing.

*Door*, nope, that would be too easy. 1 out of 4 correct. *Some*, no, 0 out of 4. *Bear*, still no, 1 out of 4. Lock out imminent. Only one viable option on screen, well here goes nothing. *Derp*, correct. Correct? You have got to be kidding me.

Sure enough the hatch hissed and slowly slid open. On the other hoof, I never would have guessed 'Derp' on my own so who was I to judge?

The tiny room was so cluttered it almost felt like being back in the shop. The walls were coated with posters depicting scenes ranging from a team of mares skating across a frozen lake under the words 'Iron Pony, Winter Games' to a wall eyed, gray pegasus advertising a mailing service. Various metal boxes were scattered around, forming impromptu furniture, including a desk, quilt coated bed and various cushioned stools. No pony was there.

There was also a liquor cabinet over in a corner, wonderful; I could use a glass after everything that happened today.

Everclear, everclear, everclear, more everclear, nothing but fucking everclear. No chardonnay, no merlot, no applejack not even any of that pink, 2 bit shit. I scoped up all the glorified paint thinner anyway,

worst come to worst I could use it as an explosive, disinfectant, or actual paint thinner, come to think of it.

My E.F.S. beeped at me.

*'>Core temperature 85 degrees and falling. Hypothermia stage III imminent.'*

With that I made a bee line for the pseudo bed.

I yanked the quilting off and wrapped it around myself. My temperature was still falling, but it was doing so more slowly. It took me a while to notice the contents of the bed. A large pegasus skeleton, with a fractured skull was curled up on the crates. I almost wiggled out of the quilts before I managed to remind myself that I had recently worn much worse and that I really liked not being a ponysicle.

He was clutching something to his chest. Very carefully, I magically wiggled the object out without disturbing the remains. It was an old envelope of photographs. A burly, brown, middle-aged pegasus buck with a wide brim hoofball cap surrounded by five young, pegasus mares, including the grey mail-pony from the posters. They were in a clinic, bringing a bouquet of flowers, to a purple, unicorn mare in a full body cast. A little hand scrawled message was written on it. *'Sorry we dropped a piano on you, again.'* I couldn't explain it, maybe it was the innocence of the scene, or the genuine concern on the faces of the pegasi, or the sheer absurdity of the quotation, but it just made me smile.

The next one had all six pegasi wearing blue vests and standing on a grassy cliff. I could vaguely see several ponies fishing something purple and green out of a lake in the background. *'Winter wrapped up on time for the first time in years. Next year we get Ditzzy a compass and go for a record.'*

*'The little muffin finally gets her cutie mark.'* A small, gray, unicorn filly was levitating a blue and gold cloak with an image of a prancing foal on it over her head, grinning from ear to ear. The cutie mark in question was obscured by the edge of a grey hoof on the lens.

The next picture was of a modest sky wagon with the words 'Ditzzy Doo Deliveries' written across the side. The grey mare waved exuberantly at the camera, grinning from ear to ear and the little muffin was bouncing in circles around her. She seemed to have been doing it long enough to leave a visible ring of trampled grass. *'Ditzzy expands the competition. I couldn't be prouder.'*

One in front of this very trailer, the burly pegasus was shaking hooves with a coffee coated earth pony with a green mane. The earth pony was wearing a fairly nice suit, and a pink and yellow butterfly pin. *'Best contract ever, Ministry of Peace sending bulk orders of medicine to the front.'*

One of the light green pegasi from the other pictures was standing with a silver disk around her neck on a pedestal with two other pegasi I didn't recognize, though the one with the gold had a dazzling rainbow mane. *'Dizzy takes the silver in the winter games, cloud clearing event.'*

The final image was of the brown buck, looking far older than the previous pictures wearing a party hat over his hoofball cap. He was sitting at the head of a long table coated with food, gifts and streamers. Four of the five mares were there as well as an striking, grey, unicorn mare about my age, I could only guess was the "little muffin" all grown up. There was also an empty seat at the table with a little name tag reading 'Flora'.

My mirth was short lived as I tuned the last picture over. There was writing scribbled on the back.

*'All my work for nothing. We tried for a spot in the stables. We tried to reserve space at the ministry buildings, at Hoofington, at Flankorage and they turned us down. I built this place; put so much work into it, so much planning. They didn't make it, none of them. I waited and waited and waited. Nopony got down here. They are all dead and I'm all alone.'*

*'What right does an old stallion like me have to survive when so many young ponies didn't? Flora, Raindrops, Showers, Dizzy, Ditzzy, Dinky, I am so sorry.'*

*'I'll see you soon fillies.'*

That's when I noticed the revolver behind the bed.

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I had managed to locate a yellow medical box, like the one from the stable, among the old pegasus' things. It had contained two of the chocolate regeneration potions, one purple healing potion and a bottle sporting the image of a livid, white mare with a mane and tail made out for fire under the words 'THERMAL, cold weather relief.'

I also dug up several sets of weather appropriate clothing, consisting of a thick jacket, coated in pockets, a fur lined cap similar to the one in the photos and a 'Boxxy Brown Moving Co.' jumpsuit. I was a bit depressed that all the suits built for a stallion fit me about as well as the sleeping bag had. The mare's suits were a bit tight and the wing sleeves fluttered around like windsocks, but they would keep me warm so I settled for the largest one with 'Dizzy Twister', embroidered in white, on the right breast and collar. My PipBuck had labeled it a 'Roaming Trader Outfit, Winterized'. That was creepily appropriate.

After returning the photos and quilt to the skeletal pony I exited the tomb. I wandered through the caves nursing one of the chocolate potions for my leg.

This new outfit was keeping me surprisingly warm. It wasn't the sleeping bag's soft, snugly warm that you just wanted to curl up in and forget the world, but my core temperature was actually going up. My sense of touch had begun to return.

I let out a sharp gasp and collapsed as a sharp pain shot through my body. The tearing sensation in my frost burns had returned, worse then ever. Even the slightest movement caused the thousands of tiny daggers inside me to rip into my insides. I curled into a tight ball, trying my best not to remain still. I could feel sharp points scraping against my lungs with each ragged breath I took. The blades were continually shrinking, but at an agonizingly slow pace.

After what felt like hours, the chainsaws under my skin returned to relatively pleasant cheese graters. I uncurled gingerly and checked one of the patches on my PipBuck leg; the yellowed section had turned deep red and wept what looked like, blood slush when I put pressure on it. My whole body still ached, but at least I could feel it. As long as I could feel I would know I was still alive and that's what was important.

I struggled back to my hooves and continued my search for Maple.



The body in the shelter just kept nagging at me. I just couldn't wrap my head around it. He had survived where so many others hadn't. How could he throw that away? All the work that had gone into that shelter wouldn't have been a waste if it had saved one pony. Just one pony and he refused to let it do that.

A noise snapped me out of my contemplation, Grim Harvest's distinctive rattle echoed through the tunnels. Being able to put weight on all four legs again, I took off at a gallop. Sharp yelping had joined the SMG; I couldn't help but feel sad for the wolves. I knew they would have eaten me in a hot second, but I couldn't help it, I liked dogs. A white bar had appeared among a half dozen, rapidly disappearing red ones.

I passed the body of a wolf pinned to the cave wall by the spike formerly lodged in Maple's PipBuck (I really wished I had thought to take the scrapper's spike rifle) as well as several others that had been reduced to mulch by a storm of bullets. I turned into a large chamber with a shallow pool in the center just in time to see Maple turn the last one's head into soup with a point-blank blast from her shotgun.

She was a mess; shallow, bleeding bites covered her exposed legs, neck and even one across her face. Her hooves were soaked in blood with small tufts of grey fur still stuck to them. Her breathing came in heavy gasps through chattering teeth. Her armor was probably not much more effective against the cold than my saddle bags had been, she was just a far stronger pony. The bodies of at least a dozen wolves and one half eaten pony littered the cave in and amongst piles of bones, most of which looked equine in origin.

"Um, Maple?" I whispered timidly. I had a healthy fear of her before, as one should for mares who could kill them with nothing, but their fetlock. But now, with her looking like some ancient goddess of war, literally standing on a mound of the dead, I was terrified. If she ever decided to turn those hooves on me there would be little I could do.

"Officer." I piped up a bit louder. She turned her head towards me as her tag blinked to red for a split second and then back to white. The bite on her face was far worse than I had thought; blood almost masked the entire right side of her face. The teeth had barely missed her eye, surrounding it with ragged punctures.

She slowly walked towards me; stumbling over a wolf that still had one of her hind legs embedded in its skull, but managed to keep her hoofing. "You shouldn't be here." She growled dangerously. "And why are you wearing a mare's clothes?"

"Are you kidding?" I asked, taken aback. She was bleeding to death and the first thing she does is chew me out and criticize my new outfit. I dug through my innumerable pockets and satchels for the Thermal and the purple health potion that I had to assume was more potent than the chocolate one from the notably larger value my PipBuck had assigned it. "Take these, quickly."

She grabbed the health potion from my telekinetic grip chugged it down. Her wounds vanished almost instantly, those purple ones really packed a wallop, I'd need to keep that in mind. Next was the Thermal, Maple's shakes quickly subsided and her cheeks were actually looking rosy.

“Okay,” I said “there’s an old shelter a little ways back, it had some medical supplies and I think there were also some jumpsuits you could wear under your barding. I think I could find it again, but I’ll need your help getting back to the entrance. I got a little l...” She shut me up by pressing her blood soaked hoof to my muzzle, the iron reek almost made me ill. She stared at with an unamused deadpan, pulled up my PipBuck and tapped a few of the buttons with her nose.

PipBucks apparently had automatic mapping. “That would have been good to know. I’ll be need a thorough rundown on how this thing works.” My stomach growled loud enough to echo across the chamber. When was the last time I had eaten? Probably never, but from my perspective I was coming up on 26 hours. “But, first I’m going to need to eat something.”

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We made our way out of the caverns at around noon, not that we could tell through the cloud curtain that still stretched across the entire sky, only pierced by the tallest mountains and several pony made towers.

“I ate too much pie.” I groaned. My stomach was doing somersaults. I had been hesitant to try a 200 year old apple pie, but food was food and this pastry was packed with enough preservatives to probably outlast its packaging. I leaned several things then; one, pie was delicious, whether it was real or virtual. Two, pie should not be eaten on an empty stomach. And three, my stomach was not used to digesting real food and protested, violently so when forced to do its job.

Maple seemed to be having none of my digestive problems as she was still contently snacking on some old cereal from an improvised feedbag. She was looking better and better the further down the mountain we went. The insulated jumpsuit we had scavenged for her from Boxxie’s shelter fit very nicely under her Stable barding and was doing a respectable job keeping her warm. I also had to guessed that the fact that the horizon was steadily getting higher, covered up by the distant mountains, was helping.

I needed something to take my mind off my aching hooves and rolling stomach. “So, about that PipBuck lesson?” I asked, hesitantly, given how aggressively she had responded to me in the past.

\*Munch\* \*Munch\*

“Hum, right.” She said with her mouth full. “Okay, hold up the PipBuck.”

I held it up.

“The first tab is your health monitor, it includes a radiation counter, a thermometer, a...” Her voice was getting more and more distant.

She wasn’t stopping...

I did my best to hobble after her on three legs. I just couldn’t figure her out, one moment she wants to rip my head off and the next she was completely dismissive.

“The second magically organizes your possessions.” I had a handle on that one, name, weight, price, etc. The price tag confused me a little as the numbers didn’t coincide with the number of bits I

knew certain items went for, the fact that my 3,800 bit book was assigned a value of 100 was particularly distressing. "Last tab is for data, it has a auto-map, file storage and even a radio. I assume you already figured out SATS and the EFS."

A radio; that was good, I could use a diversion and Maple was not the best conversationalist. I pulled out an ear bloom that was attached to the PipBuck and flipped through a hoof full of frequencies. The first one was a stallion's voice that reminded me of my own sales-buck voice, so practiced that it practically oozed.

*'...greed and wickedness. Together, we can raise Equestria back to its former beauty! Together, we can build a new kingdom where all live together in perfect unity!'*

Unity radio. Screw that, next.

The second signal was a deafening blast of static that forced me to rip my ear bloom out. Well, we won't be doing that again.

The third was a thick, raspy, but oddly melodic voice, like a singer gargling nails. It was speaking in a language that I didn't know, then again I only knew pony and a few squawks in griffin. It was a mix of harsh, one or two syllable words and long, flowing ones that strung together in what sounded like a poem spoken in cold hatred. It was hauntingly beautiful, but nothing I could stand to listen to for long.

The last one was a deep, rolling voice speaking in measured rhythm.

*'...Voice of Flankorage, this is your host, R.F.P. We have an important announcement. The Baron has been spotted in the vicinity of the Bayuchief Smelting plant. All citizens are engaged to avoid the area until this threat has moved on. For local news, I am joined by Colonel Hoarfrost. Colonel.'*

An older mare's voice that radiated confidence, authority, and a notable amount of arrogance replaced R.F.P.'s.

*'All ponies are encouraged to disregard the seditious Legion broadcasts. They are intended to spread fear and disharmony among us, we will not let them. If you are still concerned, Frostborn recruiting offices are always open and eager to help ponies defend their homes. Now, I return you to R.F.P.'s regularly scheduled program.'*

A piece of completely unfamiliar music flowed out of my ear-bud. It was dominated by a violin and a military drum beat, joined by a booming chorus of mares and bucks after about a minute. I couldn't decide whether to be inspired or intimidated.

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After a few hours of climbing we spotted a small village sitting at the base of a relatively smooth slope that extended well up the mountain. A few dozen wooden cottages were scattered around a large central building with two parallel wires running out of a square hole that nearly took up the entire third floor, and up the mountain. Several ponies were milling around the central building.

My frostbite had been steadily healing over the past few hours; It was still painful, but no worse

than a bruise. My stomach had stopped resisting and resigned its self to its task of digesting solid food. And we had just found civilisation. I was actually feeling rather good, all things considered.

Finally. Now we just needed to enlist the help of these ponies to save the stable or, at least get directions to somepony who could help and all this would be over.

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Note to self: assume everything here wants to kill you until proven otherwise.

When we approached, what my PipBuck had kindly labeled, 'Coltinvill Ski Lodge' I had actually bothered to notice that all their tags were white. There were five earth ponies and two unicorns, all decked out in some sort of combat barding, a little lighter weight than Maple's, covered in little bits of jagged metal and other improvised patches. As we approached I couldn't help but notice that their coats were far thicker than our own, I might have even gone as far as to call them fluffy. They were amiable enough to start with, for what looked like blenders on legs.

A large, green, buck with a blond mane and a circular saw on his flank told us to. "Stay put till we get da boss."

Da Boss turned out to be a strongly built griffin in a suit of heavy barding, that would have almost looked professional if it had been cleaned sometime in the past ten years. She had a heavily stylized bird of prey painted in red across her left pauldron. A pair of sizable rifles were slung under her wings, looking like a foal's toys next to her sheer bulk.

She smiled and walked up to us as though we were expected guests extending a talon in polite greeting. I extended my hoof as well, happy to finally find someone friendly. The next thing I knew, all the tags had turned red, she had her rifle pressed into my neck and one of the fuzzy ponies, a red unicorn with a black and white, striped mohawk and a set of hoof prints for a cutie mark, had floated his own hoof cannon to the back of Maple's head.

"Who the fuck are you?" The armored griffin demanded. "And why shouldn't I just shoot you now?"

Okay, who am I? 'I just escaped from Stable 114, please don't shoot me, it's my first day outside.' No, that would be stupid. Think up a lie. "I'm a traveling merchant." I replied with my best 'you can trust me' grin. Well, zero points for originality there Ocher, but I suppose the best lies have an element of truth.

"Well you're dressed for it," She replied. "But if you're a merchant where's your brahmin?"

Where is my brahmin? Brahmin, brahmin... What the hell is a brahmin? "I, uh, sold it. Yeah." That sure was convincing. I'm gonna die.

"Do you seriously expect me to believe that a trader would sell their pack brahmin?" She asked with a sneer, driving the barrel of her rifle deeper into my neck. Maple started stealing glances at one of her guards' holstered pistol.

Pack brahmin, some sort of beast of burden... The two headed cow thing! Brahmin were two

headed cow things! Oh, I could work with this. "Yes, yes I do." I said, confidence returning to my voice. "She got hurt on the road and would never have survived the trip here, so I sold her and everything I couldn't carry. Better to take a small loss than lose everything if she fell off a cliff or something right?"

"I suppose that makes sense." She mumbled. After a little pondering she broke into the most disturbing smile I had ever seen. "That means you're sitting on quite a few caps. Give them to me!"

"You want my what now?" The look of utter confusion on my face must have been priceless.

"Don't play dumb!" She barked. "Your bottle caps, give them to me now or I'll paint you with your guard's brains and see if you get it then!"

She wants bottle caps?! No time to ponder that, Maple had a gun to her head. I opened my PipBuck inventory and pulled out a sack of 1326 caps! Wow, slavers collect bottle caps apparently. "There." I said as I handed her the caps.

Her eyes lit up at the sight of them. "That's a lot for one brahmin." She pulled her gun away from my neck as the other guards gathered around her to ogle the sack of trash.

Caps for a brahmin?

"I'm gonna to get myself someth'n nice with these." The griffin boasted, puffing up her chest.

Why would I get caps for selling a...

"Maybe a new chew toy." She continued, her grin getting more and more predatory by the moment.

AW CRAP! I just gave this feathered bitch all my money.

"I hear dat." Piped one of the other guards, a blue mare with a pink mane and a shotgun. "The Herald's girls just picked up a fresh batch from the stable up there." She waved a hoof up the ski slope.

That's what the little value tab on my... come again?

"Yeah, I saw them on my way in." She said licking her beak. "That little, pink mare looks like a screamer."

Little, pink mare?... Primrose...

You threaten us. You rob us! AND NOW YOU PLAN TO HURT MY FRIEND?!

Category changed, monsters. You all die now.

I lowered my head, pointing the tip of my horn at the griffon's face. I turned to Maple; staring until I was sure I had her attention and then shut my eyes as tightly as I could. I prayed she got the hint.

I started building up magic in my horn. Fortunately, our captors were too preoccupied discussing

the various unpleasant things they had planned for my caps to notice. I built up one overflow. Two, I started sweating, still nothing. Three, the magical strain was causing my knees to nearly buckle, wow they were dense.

"Hay!" The griffin yelled, finally noticing the leg sized, golden glow coming from my forehead. "What do y-?"

"Now!" I yelled as I released the magic in a flash of light bright enough to burn even through my eyelids.

The griffin shrieked and I immediately leaped forward, embedding my horn into her.

\*BANG!\* \*BANG!\*

Still a bit dazed from my own spell I opened my eyes just in time to see Maple grab the blue mare's pistol and shoot her twice in the chest before she even got it out of the holster. The massive bullets tore gaping holes, easily the size of sparkle cola bottles, through the guard.

Looking up through the spots still swimming in my eyes, I realized that I had missed her neck in my blind charge. My horn was embedded down to my forehead in one of her unarmored armpits. I had gotten inside the range of her rifles, blinded her and probably cost her the use of her arm, but now I had my horn stuck in a very large, very angry griffin, who was easily three times my size. Not a good place to be.

In a random frenzy, her functional talon raked my side. My new jumpsuit provided about as much protection as raider armor, but she still punched through with little effort. Three lines of liquid fire opened down the length of my body as her claws ran through me as though I were made of butter.

I struggled to get free to no avail. Her mangled muscles were clenched around my horn, holding me in place. To make matters worse, every time I tried to jerk away her claws sunk deeper between my ribs.

I could barely make out Maple trading shots with the remaining fuzzy thugs around the flailing boss. Three others, including the blue mare who had pointed out the stable, were already sprawled out in slowly growing, red circles of snow. That still left four on one, she wouldn't be able to help me any time soon.

I was thoroughly panicking. Okay, you had saved me before SATS, I have no weapon, I still hope you work. Time slowed to a crawl. It was letting me target something! Yes. Don't care what it is, just do it.

My telekinesis reached out and squeezed something with all my strength. The griffin staggered, painfully ripping her claw out of my side to grab her chest. A second clench brought her to the floor, pulling me under her. Her weight was unbearable. Her armored bulk pressed so tightly on my chest that I couldn't breathe and my blood was pumping out in large sheets.

It was her or me now. Enough energy for one more charge of... Telekinesis>Heart?! I did not know I could do that. I let SATS take over and grasped at her heart with my magic. The muscle

contracted and my spell held it there for two solid seconds. It didn't start back up.

*'>Shrikes infamy gained, Vilified.'*

Now I was bleeding out under a **dead**, armored griffin that was slowly crushing the life out of me. Somehow I had figured this would have turned out better.

*"At least she isn't making any new holes."* The icy voice scoffed.

True, true. Now stop talking to the nice, stress induced hallucination.

*"I could also be a blood loss induced hallucination."*

That was an excellent point, voice I'm not listening to anymore. I managed to wiggle loose enough to retrieve my last, thankfully unbroken, health potion. The potion's magic took painfully long to knit the slashes shut and I could feel it slowly repairing the internal damage. Unlike the nearly instantaneous purple potions, these things were clearly not meant to be used in the middle of a fire fight.

Blood loss, under control. Now for the crushing issue. I magically groped around the griffin for the clasps, straps, screws and whatever else she may have used to hold her armor on. In my haste to get free I wound up ripping out as many feathers and clumps of fur as armor plates. I was actually making progress until I got to the breast plate. The twenty pound slab of ceramics and steel quickly overwhelmed my telekinesis, dropping it inches from my face. While I was able to breathe again, I still couldn't free myself.

Thrashing futilely in rage and frustration I cursed The Unity, Da Boss and The Goddesses themselves. I could have managed this a few days ago. No, I wouldn't have had any reason to handle this a few days ago. I had no right to be here.

Why was I such a weak pony?

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After what felt like hours Maple dragged Da Boss' body off me. She was looking nearly as bad as she had in the cave. Her barding was peppered with bullet holes and burns from some sort of magical energy weapon. I figured from her multitude of small cuts and the clump of blood soaked, black and white mane hanging from the small cannon she held in her mouth, that she had even gone tooth and hoof with Tracks.

"Thanks." I said, unsteadily rising to my hooves. "How are you holding up?"

She spat out the gun and grumbled. "I'll live."

"That's good." I started to stretch out my aching body. "Look, I'm sorry about this. I should have known better than to just trot into strange ponies and expect to be welcomed."

"And I should have stopped you. I'm losing my edge." She sighed. "You wouldn't happen to have magicked up any more healing potions?"

“Um...” I darted around, emptying all The Shrike's bags into my own, followed by a quick flip through my PipBuck's inventory. “No, no I have not. I do have some bandages...” I glanced through the few things The PipBuck had qualified as Aid. “And some disinfectant, but you won't like it.”

“I'm sure I'd like gangrene less.” She puffed up her chest. “I can take it.” I pulled the bottles of Everclear out of my bags. “Aw, horse apples.” She groaned, losing a bit of her bolster. “This is really going to suck.”

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We promptly moved into the nearest cabin. If I doused her outside, the evaporating alcohol would have frozen her within moments.

The cabin was, for lack of a better word, cozy. It seemed to have weathered the last 200 years fairly well. A rustic, four poster bed, with only a light coating of dust and mildew, was adjacent to a large, brick fireplace. Empty door frames led into a modest kitchen with a wood paneled fridge and a surprisingly modern and out of place bathroom. An intricately carved, wooden box was resting next to the fireplace full chopped wood and a few alchemically enhanced starter logs.

I floated one of the starters and a pile of chopped logs into the hearth. A shot from the novasurge pistol one of the Shrikes had shot Maple with and we had a respectable fire.

“Let me check around for any medical supplies.” I said while I snuffled around the kitchen. “We wouldn't want to do something unpleasant when we have a potion nearby.”

“Right, right.” She grumbled.

The kitchen held little more than a few knives, pots, pans and dishware. The fridge was empty. Oven, empty. The cabinets yielded some unenchanted bandages for accidents. Those would come in handy, but we would still need the disinfectant. On to the bathroom. Oh, goody, a medical box... a locked medical box, perfect.

“Sorry, no go.” I called out from the bathroom, pulling out the bottles of everclear.

When I walked back to the main room Maple was gingerly stripping out of her armor. Under the thick layers of barding she had a stunning figure, even with her numerous injuries; the flexing of her well toned muscles was almost hypnotic.

“Ocher.”

“Huh, what?” My attention shifted back to her face.

“Pass me one of those.” She said, pointing a hoof at one of the floating bottles. “I'll be dammed if I get drenched in booze without getting drunk.”

I dully floated one over to her and unscrewed the cap. She chugged down a solid quarter of the bottle before coming up for air. I couldn't help, but stand there dumbfounded. That stuff was 90% alcohol



and she just downed enough to floor any of the farm ponies back home as if it were nothing. On top of everything else, she was turning a very nice shade of purple.

“Um, ready?” I asked awkwardly, my skin tight jumpsuit getting very uncomfortable; it was very obviously designed for a mare. She nodded. Okay, self control, you can do this without making an ass of yourself. I proceeded to pour the rest of the Everclear over her wounds causing her to hiss and tense up. Not helping!

Behave Ocher, behave. This is purely platonic. You’re just wrapping wounds... on the naked, booze soaked, and slightly inebriated mare with an amazing body. Why do you hate me, Equestria?

I managed to practically mummify her without doing anything ungentlecoltly.

“Stay here,” I said heading for the door. “I’m going to make sure there are no other Shrikes in the area.”

“Yes ma’am.” She mumbled. Ma’am? Better not question it, at least she wasn’t arguing. She was in no shape to fight, but I still doubted I could stop her if she wanted to.

I stepped back out into the snow and made for the lodge, my barding still chafing terribly. “Stupid sexy Maple.”

Footnote: Level Up

New Perk: Auroramancer 2 -- The power of your light spells is increased by 50%. You may also create a stronger burst, identical to a flash-bang grenade. This blast is centered on you and is disorienting to use. Sunglasses weaken, but do not negate this spell.

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

(Special thanks to DiceArt, Tsoxychor and Twitchy for helping me go over this and making it as good as it could be. And to all the good folks at [Fallout: Equestria Side Stories Compilation](#))