

## Chapter 17: Blood On Blood

*"Good afternoon, mares and gentlecolts! You are listening to New Pegasus Radio, giving you the best entertainment in town, and keeping you in touch of everything happened, happening and bound to happen! I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, and you have been listening to Sapphire Shores' greatest hits, live at the Royal Celestia Hall; a true classic that can withstand the flow of time and be enjoyed by young and old alike. I simply can't get enough of her voice.*

*It is time for the news, everypony, and what news indeed! The situation in the streets keeps being chaotic, with fights for almost every crossing, so please stay at home and don't risk yourselves! This conflict should end soon, either because one of the factions ends up getting the upper hoof or because the NER shows up and cleans this mess, which, to be honest, would be a good solution. I would like to share my thoughts with you for a moment, if you don't mind.*

*The way I see it, our current governors have failed to ensure peace and prosperity for the population of New Pegasus, embarking on an endless quarrel about who the supreme ruler of the city is; especially since Sandmound Ferratura was murdered. In their blind quest for domination, they have forgotten what their purpose is: to let the City of New Pegasus grow and progress towards a future of greatness and independence from the large expansive powers that populate the Wasteland. Instead, by fighting each other they're bleeding the populace dry and giving the Republic a golden chance to lay claim upon us!*

*Sigh...*

*Political rant over, folks, let's return to the facts; although we're not leaving the New Pegasus political spectrum. Full House has taken a step back in the management of the Platinum Horseshoe, leaving its spot to a certain pony called Farsight, of whom we at New Pegasus Radio had never heard of. In my humble opinion, I suppose that keeping the successor below the radar is a way of ensuring that he isn't targeted by rival organizations, but I can't help to feel a bit suspicious about his backstory: there is none.*

*However, one mustn't judge without knowing the pony, and that's why we asked for a live interview with the new manager of the Horseshoe; but he declined our invitation. In exchange he gave us the chance to chat a bit with him in his office on top of the Spire, and this humble reporter can tell you that he's a well-mannered buck with a very sharp mind.*

*His words were clear, leaving no chance for ambiguities. He told us that Full House had confessed him that he was tired of the situation and that he wanted to live an anonymous retirement, far from the stress of leading an organization. He also let us know that he wants to solve the conflict as soon as possible, to avoid the Republic from interfering with local issues, and that he will have very little mercy with those who oppose him, such as the Ferratura Family. He's willing to negotiate, yes, but only to accept the terms of a capitulation. Strong words for a neophyte, don't you think?*

*On other news, the NER is on its way to New Pegasus. According to rumours across the Wasteland, an entire Army is crossing Divide Pass to end with the internal wars of the city and to submit it to Republican rule. This reporter wishes that it never comes to happen, and is worried about another thing: what if the factions that have been fighting each other unite to resist against the NER? Will we accept being used as meat shields against the invading forces?*

*Oh well, there is very little we can do about it, right? We can only hope for the best and prepare for the worst, as those who have the power to decide might not have the clarity of mind to take the best choice. In the meantime, let's go with some more music, shall we? I've got this record in my hooves... that will really blast your mind off! It's fresh from the recording studio in Manehattan, and it's the newest work of Velvet Remedy herself! Enjoy it, and remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls!"*

Somepony said someday that war never changes. Well, I had a totally different opinion. War is an ever-changing matter, almost alive and definitely pulsating and altering its ways every minute and every second. New Pegasus was at war, but that wasn't the same war that ravaged the world and turned it into a Wasteland, it was a face-to-face struggle, with ponies dying for a square meter of tarmac and concrete, while throwing potshots at each other and hogging the ground as if it were a long lost lover.

I had read many books about classic combat and warfare in my early life. I suppose that some of the ponies that first took shelter in Stable 188 were avid History readers, and I used much of my time down there to delve in the theories and tales of the grand battles of the past. When, after having defeated Full House, I returned to the surface, I witnessed House's robots - my robots now - not being able to confront the Ferraturas properly, and taking heavy damage.

I noticed that the enemy grunts fought back to back, forming packs of two or three and moving while rotating, sending shots in every direction and keeping my mechanic troopers from advancing towards them. Laser guns were very inaccurate, and only worked acceptably at middle range or closer, and by the time a robo pony had rolled to a position from which it could have chances of taking out an enemy, Verrazano's goons would have blown their fuses with a properly placed bullet.

On the other hoof, the robots showed little coherence in their attacks. A shy advance here and there, a group of five pinned down by a lone grunt who was blocking their only route towards the Clops, even a small pack of ponies with a machine gun fending off waves of robots from the middle of a crossing. It was a true disgrace, and it came to show that Full House had programmed the droids for deterrence measures more than for actual combat.

"Err, Farsight..." Nadyr mumbled, while leaving Snake Eater's dead body aside. We couldn't even pay him proper honors with the conflict we were facing. "I think your war is going down the drain."

"It will, if I don't do something about it..." I muttered in anger. "But I don't have a vision of the field from here. I need more data to be able to organize my troops."

"What about Snake Eater?" Rose asked. "We can't just leave him like that!"

"I know." I nodded sternly. "Still, we need to hold the line. This is our war now, remember?"

"Can't you use House's device to keep him in good conditions until the crisis is over?" Nadyr proposed.

"That's a good idea, Nadyr. I think you two should return and put Snake into stasis while I head to the top of the Spire and try to get a broader view of things from up there. Come back to me as soon as you're done, and hopefully, we should put a rope around the Ferraturas' necks by the end of the day."

"I really hope you're right..." Nadyr mumbled. "I need to get to my baby Dee as soon as possible."

"Your baby Dee can defend herself quite nicely." Rose smiled smugly. "Now help me with good old Snake."

"As you command, my young mistress." Nadyr bowed ironically as a response, then grabbed Snake's corpse and put it on his back. "Let's go."

"See you soon, Farsight!" Rose winked.

"Yes, see you soon..." I mumbled, and darted into the Casino.

Many things battled for attention in my mind, although all of them were related to the same thing: ensuring my control over New Pegasus. I had gone too far to back down now, and the stakes were far too high to lose them. I needed to win that war, or all I had put into play would be lost; either because the Ferraturas took it - which would mean my certain death - or because the NER would annex New Pegasus, and to be honest, there were some ponies in the Republic that didn't appreciate me all that much.

The elevator doors opened and the obnoxious metallic voice announced that I was at the Spire Suite, as if I just didn't know. I galloped to the massive computer through which I had communicated with House and turned it on, hoping there would be no more security measures to bypass. Time was of the essence, and I didn't want to spend minutes waiting for my PipBuck to fend off another five sets of firewalls.

"Come on..." I hissed. "Come on!"

Finally, the terminal chimed and the screen turned on, welcoming me (more properly welcoming Full House) to the control system of the Platinum Horseshoe, and an instant later I was browsing through cameras, maps and movement vectors of the roboponies that were fighting on the streets. That was exactly what I had been craving for.

"Yes, that's more like it!" I grinned mischievously as I began to operate buttons and knobs.

My first move was to reorganize my troops. I couldn't expect to do any advances if my lines were broken and in disarray, so I ordered the roboponies to fall back and regroup at a series of key points that could easily be defended, such as the Horseshoe and some other buildings with colonnades and archways. Naturally, that caused the Ferratura troops to cheer and advance out of cover.

Confidence is a constant danger for the rational mind, and in a situation like that, being overconfident could mean putting yourself in jeopardy. That lesson should be the first one taught in the Wasteland, but it seemed that the Ferratura grunts had never heard of it. As soon as they leapt onto the open streets, I ordered a barrage of fire to keep them suppressed. They fell by the dozen, and the ones remaining backpedaled like crazy into their strongholds.

"All right." I said sternly. "Now, advance."

The roboponies began marching in perfect order, their lines packed tight, almost into a phalanx of metal bodies that spewed deadly laser beams towards their enemies. It must have been a pretty fearsome sight to behold from the street, as the wall of bots moved ever closer. I felt a sudden surge of glee and pleasure from watching the bright dots that symbolized my units overrun the crosses that indicated enemy ponies' known positions. While I was pushing towards the Ferratura bases, the elevator chimed again and my two companions trotted into the room.

"Wheew." Nadyr whistled in awe. "Full House had a nice setup here. This is going to be your new place?"

"To be honest, I have never even thought about it." I shook my head. "Although it wouldn't be bad at all."

"Come on, bro. I would kill for a crib like this."

"We don't need to get to such levels, Nadyr. You have a fantastic home down at Freedom Field."

"I know!" Nadyr laughed. "I was just fooling with you. But speaking honestly, you should grab this place for yourself. It shows some status and class."

"Coming from you, that is something to be taken into account." I nodded.

"How are things going, by the way?" Rose asked.

"Slowly progressing." I replied without taking my eyes away from the screen. "The enemy is tough and knows its basics though, it won't be easy to flush them out of the streets."

"Please, Farsight, you've got robots, for Celestia's sake!" Rose huffed. "Don't go telling me that you can't handle the situation."

"Speaking of handling the situation, bro..." Nadyr pointed at the screen. "You have a

breakthrough in the south end of the front!"

"What the fuck?" I coughed and looked at the screen. Indeed, a group of Ferratura thugs was making my robots retreat and was threatening to break the line. I furiously pushed the controls of the terminal to get some of the bots to stop the enemy advance. However, I was running dangerously low on units, and the lines were becoming a bit too thin in some spots.

"What's the problem, Farsight?"

"I think we can't hold them with the number of bots we have." I shook my head and considered the possibilities. "We're going to have to hit the frontlines."

"Damn. I won't lie to you, I have never said no to some good action, but ever since I became a father... well, let's say that I have more reasons to live for."

"Nadyr..." I sighed. "I understand, but as long as we don't get things cleared in New Pegasus, we won't be able to secure Freedom Field; which is what worries you, am I right?"

"Sure, sure..." Nadyr doubted.

"Just take care of yourself. I don't want to be shot either, so we'll keep our heads low and be as careful and cautious as possible, understood?"

"Understood." Nadyr grinned. "If anything was to happen to me..."

"It's not going to happen." I interrupted sternly. "Trust me."

The half-zebra nodded. I knew he was worried about his family, and I understood him as far as I could. I felt something similar when it came to him and Rose, since they were a sort of family to me. I wouldn't let anything happen to any of them, even if I had to put my hide on the line.

"Come on, you two." Lavender's voice spoke coldly. "Verrazano's goons are pushing harder."

"Let's get moving, then."

The three of us walked into the elevator, which proved to be a bit too tight for so many ponies, and began our descent into the fray. Nadyr mumbled something I couldn't understand, while Rose had been taken over by Lavender, who eagerly shook while waiting for the elevator to open. I kept visualizing the map of New Pegasus, with the boundaries between factions moving and slithering like a large worm. We needed to end that madness, or the NER would eat us alive.

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"Keep your head down!" Lavender roared.

I ducked behind a broken block of concrete that had been ripped off a wall by an explosion,

right before a hail of bullets spewed from a minigun pierced the air where my head had been standing a second ago. The situation had become critical, as the Ferraturas had brought some heavy firepower into play, and what was more dangerous; they had grenades that forced us to move away from cover, turning us into target practice.

"Farsight, do you want to get killed or what?"

"You know that close combat isn't my thing, don't you, Lavender?"

"Close combat? Don't make me laugh my ass off, Farsight, those bucks are like fifty metres away!"

"That's close enough for me! I need a safe distance to aim, preferably a distance from which my enemy can't hit me."

"And that's why you're a coward, Farsight." Lavender's voice sounded like a teacher giving a lecture.

"Cowards tend to live longer." Nadyr grinned. "Until they get picked like molerats."

"Which isn't my intention." I replied.

"Then be careful and aim straight, dammit!" Lavender yelled.

"How am I supposed to aim properly if every time I poke my head out of cover I have to dive instantly or get turned into red mash?"

"What about your fancy aiming system?"

"It only targets enemies IN SIGHT." I groaned. "I can't activate it while lying on the floor."

"He's got a point there." Nadyr nodded and tried to take a blind shot.

"Wait a minute, Lavender!" I remembered. "Didn't you know how to conjure a shield spell?"

"Yes, but it won't let our bullets through, either."

"I don't need to fire through it." I grinned. "Here's the plan: you activate the shield and I get up and take aim at the minigun buck. When I give the order, you turn off the spell and I take my shot. There are two possible outcomes: either I kill the minigun carrier or I don't, in which case I will get turned to red jello. Do you understand?"

"I always thought you were crazy, Farsight." Lavender grimaced. "Now I know for certain that you are a real nutcase."

"Says psychofilly." I laughed, but my laugh got choked down by the sound of gunfire. "Are you ready?"

"Say the word."

"Activate it!"

Lavender's horn glowed red and a crimson bubble enveloped us, making the bullets whizzing above us bounce and fall dead on the floor. I quickly got up and aimed my rifle at the head of the minigun-wielding stallion, a large muscled buck with a perm and a moustache, clad in Ferratura combat armor.

"How long is it going to take?" Lavender was sweating, as each deflected bullet drained her energies.

"Just a second." I centered the crosshairs at the stallion's brow, and took a deep breath. "Three... two... one... SHIELD DOWN!"

**BLAM!**

The minigun fell silent as the pony that had been carrying it was taken down by a rifle bullet right between the eyes. My trick had worked properly, and Nadyr wasted no time joining me in the fight. Now that their main weapon had been disabled, the rest of the Ferratura goons found themselves confused and not knowing what to do, a perfect moment for a counterattack.

"That's it! FORWARD!" I roared, as I took another grunt down.

The roboponies that had been forced to retreat by the last attack of the Ferraturas began to move towards enemy positions with the same cold determination they had done before. Their programming was efficient, provided somepony told them how to behave in the battlefield. With my mechanic troops taking care of the issue from there, we were free to move to another point.

"What now, Farsight?" Nadyr asked.

"I think we should head for Freedom Field. I can't divert any roboponies to help them, since they all have their hooves... or wheels, or whatever quite full dealing with the Ferraturas. We'll be of more help over the other side of the walls."

"Thank Celestia, I was waiting for you to say that."

"Let's move!" I said, and galloped towards the gates.

With that last battle, we had broken contact between the two Ferratura armies, the one in New Pegasus and the one in Freedom Field. From there on, my robots would take care of the forces that surrounded the Clops while we headed to the neighboring town to aid Dee and her ponies in the battle. I had no idea of how many soldiers Verrazano had sent to take over our former home, but we knew that the gangs of Freedom Field were no useless chums.

"Farsight, wait!" the voice of a pony called me from the side.

I turned my head to face Standoff, the assistant pony of the NPPD, who looked pretty badly bruised after a long battle against the Ferraturas. He looked angry and resentful, but that was him all the way.

"What is it, Standoff?"

"Farsight, we have a situation at the Library. A group of grunts has entrenched itself within the building and we need all the help we can get to take them out."

"I'm sorry, but I have more important matters to attend to." I replied politely, although I didn't like Standoff's attitude at all. "I am sure I can divert some roboponies once the situation has calmed down, but not for now, you'll have to work alone."

"Who do you think you're talking to, you maggot?" Standoff barked. "I am an officer of the NPPD, which means that I represent the authority here! If you don't comply, I will get you thrown back to Freedom Field, where you really belong!"

I felt anger bubble and all the unfinished issues I had with him came to my mind. Without thinking twice, I conjured a grasping spell on his neck and applied pressure. Standoff gurgled and whined when he felt his air ducts block by my grip and began kicking nervously as I lifted him from the floor. I took a step forward and looked him in the eyes with hatred in my face.

"Listen to me, you incompetent equine! I don't know if you have noticed, but I have taken over Full House's organization and political status, so that means that I am the law in New Pegasus, and that YOU will bow down to ME if you want to keep your lousy job. Understood?"

Standoff nodded nervously, his face clenched in despair.

"Good. Now get back to your post and keep those idiots at bay. I will send you reinforcements as soon as possible."

"Y-yes..." Standoff whispered.

I nodded and released the lock, letting Standoff fall on his flanks. He coughed and gasped for air, while looking at me with a mixture of fear and anger. Claiming a petty revenge might not have been the smartest idea, but he needed to be taught a lesson in respect. I walked past the police pony and headed for the exit without paying him any attention, but I managed to see him look at me in rage from the corner of my eye.

"Why did you do that?" Rose asked.

"He and I have a past, and I have set things straight for once." I grumbled.

"Don't expect me to mindlessly support you if you go down that way, Farsight." She



chastised me for my behaviour. Somehow, I should have seen that coming, knowing Rose. "I am the law so bow down to me. What makes you better than Full House, then?"

"I am not claiming to be better." I replied dryly. "I'm just me, and you know that I don't work like that, usually."

"I do, but I've seen that given the proper circumstances you can react like a thug, and I don't like that at all. Promise me that you won't fall to their level."

"Rose, trust me." I sighed. "I promise."

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The situation in Freedom Field was far worse than we had imagined. At first, I believed that the Ferraturas' main war effort would have been directed towards seizing New Pegasus, leaving the neighboring town as a secondary prize once the main target had been put under control. However, it seemed that our foes had a totally different view of things and had diverted most of their units to the streets of my former home. The reason behind that move was far beyond my understanding, although I did have some suspicions.

First things first, Freedom Field had been neutral to all the conflict between the Ferraturas and Full House, not to mention that they had achieved a level of peace and tranquility that had lowered their defences. Besides, the gangs were focused on keeping enemies from the Wasteland away, but they weren't paying any attention to a possible invasion coming from New Pegasus.

Secondly, and in a more personal level, the Ferraturas knew of my ties to Freedom Field, and so did Full House. If their intention was to take punish me for having tried to outsmart them, bringing their war over to that territory would be a possibility. However, that option was far less probable. I firmly believed that it was a territorial dispute and a way of minimizing the level of threat that Dee and her ponies implied to the leaders of New Pegasus.

As we walked into town, we found ourselves in the middle of a battle of trenches, with ponies firing from the windows, from rooftops, from cover points in the streets... the whole city was a large crossfire, and there didn't seem to be any significant advances from one side or the other. While moving quickly to hide from the bulletstorm, we tried to see where the friendly ponies were and where the enemies had entrenched themselves; with little luck. It was a complete chaos.

"I thought I would never see you again." The voice of a mare thundered over the gunfire, and we turned our heads to see who had called us.

To our side stood a massive hulk of steel and wiring, a creature that resembled a pony in shape but that was more machine than flesh. I immediately thought on the roboponies that worked for me, but they didn't have the towering presence of the pony that looked at us through the tinted visors of its helmet.

"Yet here you are. Have you come to our aid?" She asked.

"More or less." I said, questioningly. "It depends on who you are."

"Farsight, you have such a bad memory." The mare laughed and the helmet hissed lightly as it detached from the rest of the armor. A grey mane fluttered and fell to the sides of the head of a familiar pony.

"Ampera." I smiled. "Now I remember, that is the T-66 armor you were building."

"Not anymore. This is the T-66B Champion Armor, a modification that I did to the original Commander schematics."

"Yes, the original was too heavy to be worn properly."

"Why, I'm impressed! I thought that you hadn't paid any attention." Ampera laughed ironically.

"Don't underestimate what I am capable of, Ampera." I smiled cunningly. "I own half of New Pegasus now, and I'm on the move to seize the other half."

"Good for you, then, but we have a little problem here, as you can see."

"That's what we're here for, Ampera." Nadyr said sternly. "Dee needs as many hooves as she can get, don't you think?"

"Naturally." Ampera nodded.

"Ampera, what's the current situation?" I asked. I needed to know what was going on.

"In a word: bad. In two: fucked up. The Ferratura troops have entrenched themselves in the buildings, and to get things done we need to flush them house by house. Dee doesn't like the idea all that much, since it would mean the probable destruction of the majority of the city."

"If that's how things are, I must agree with Dee." I nodded. "We need to take them out cleanly. Otherwise, we might have a popular revolt afterwards."

"Don't get me wrong, I understand that." Ampera frowned. "However, trying to get into the buildings would mean us heavy casualties."

"Hmmm..." I rubbed my chin. "It's a difficult situation, indeed."

"Listen, Farsight, this is no place for meditating." Ampera grunted. "Follow me, I'll take you to our headquarters. From there we can discuss what to do."

"I agree." I nodded.

"Then let's go. We have no time to lose."

Ampera put her helmet back on and began firing from her saddlebag-mounted miniguns, making the goons in the street duck for cover, while we moved close to the buildings. The former Steel Ranger trotted down the middle of the street, concentrating most of the enemy fire from windows or rooftops, giving us the chance to advance almost unnoticed by the Ferratura snipers. Every now and then, I got a clear sight of a pony's face, and I didn't waste my time with my rifle. An enemy down was an enemy down.

Ampera took us through the battlefield towards the newly-opened Town Hall. Trader plaza had been turned into a supply depot where caravaneers came and went, selling their products at a higher price because of the conflict, and the Fort was bubbling with activity, with wounded of both sides being dragged to be healed.

"Dee is at the top floor office." Ampera grunted through her helmet. "I'll stay down here, clearing the streets. You go and figure something out."

"Give them hell, Ranger!" Rose yayed.

"Good luck, Ampera." I smiled. "Don't get yourself killed."

The ex-Ranger turned around and galloped into the crossfire, while sending a hail of bullets in every direction. It wasn't the smartest of tactics, but in the time I was watching, I saw four Ferratura grunts fall victim of her spray-and-pray attack. I smiled and galloped upstairs, towards the large office Dee had built on top of the Town Hall.

The ambient inside the headquarters was dreary and grim, as if the battle had been already lost. It was true that the situation was getting close to becoming a stalemate, but I didn't have the feeling that it couldn't be won. With a bit of patience, we would be able to keep the Ferraturas at bay while I brought my robots from New Pegasus to carry on with the fight.

Dee was standing in front of the office table, on which a map of Freedom Field had been displayed. Saddle Buckmare walked up and down the room with an angry expression, with his suit wrinkled and broken in some parts. Metronome was nowhere to be seen, nor was LaRoche.

"Darling..." Nadyr galloped to Dee and gave her a long, passionate kiss. "How are you? Are you hurt?"

"No, Naddy, I'm OK." Dee smiled with a worried face. "I've been here all along, so I've never been close to the battle."

"Thank the Goddesses..." Nadyr whispered.

"Are you alright, honey?" Dee asked.

"Yes, everything's fine. I was so concerned about you..."

"Easy now, my dear. We've got other matters to attend to." Dee looked beyond the half-zebra and saw me standing on the doorway. "Farsight. I've heard about your... feat. Congratulations. You weren't lying when you told me you would take over the world."

"I always tell the truth, Dee." I smiled. "Even when I lie... And in a way, that is why I'm here."

"The Ferratura attack was your doing?"

"I hardly think so." I shrugged. "Probably this was within their plans from the very beginning, more so when Freedom Field became a city instead of a ghetto."

"Then why are you here?" Saddle spewed.

"Simple." I said calmly. "I need the Ferraturas out of the picture to take over New Pegasus."

"Always so selfish." Buckmare growled.

"As selfish as you may be, Saddle. This is your problem as well as mine, so let's stop bitching and let's cooperate, shall we?"

Saddle gave me an angry look and walked right towards me. For a moment I thought he would buck me in the face, so I got ready to fight, but then he stopped and gazed me eye to eye.

"Listen, Farsight. You have cost me my two bodyguards, because I don't see Snake with you. Because of your messing around, my casino is now under the control of a fat balding Ferratura chieftain; and my wife is out there taking bullets like a fairground attraction!"

"A fat balding Ferratura?" I asked. "Red mane, dressed in a murky tracksuit?"

"Yes." Saddle was partly angry and partly confused.

"That's Verrazano Ferratura, the family heir!" I roared in joy. "That's where our efforts should be headed for."

"Do you think that taking down their leader will be enough to defeat them?" Dee asked, surprised. "Are they so devoted to their hierarchy?"

"I don't think they'll surrender if Verrazano falls, but it will probably leave them in disarray. In any case, I think that their morale will suffer a critical hit if we take down their leader."

"Hmm, that sounds interesting enough. It should save us the problem of cleaning the city block by block." Dee rubbed her chin, pondering the situation.

"But we need to get to the Diamonds first, Dee!" Saddle didn't see things so clearly.

"Ampera is a walking defense platform, Saddle. I know you're worried about her, but she's a

trained Steel Ranger, and her advantage in terms of armor and weaponry is simply undeniable. She would be the perfect spearhead for us."

"I know, but that doesn't solve that other problem either."

"What other problem?" I asked.

"The NER is coming." Dee shook her head. "The ambassador in New Pegasus sent a distress call to her leaders and apparently, another army has crossed the Divide and is inbound pretty soon."

"We won't stand a chance against them." Saddle stomped the floor in denial.

"Hm, that is an unexpected turn of events." I considered the options. "Still, I think we can tackle them one at a time. We need to take Verrazano out of the picture before the Republic knocks at our door. Then we'll handle the NER... I'll handle the NER."

"What will you do? Ask them politely to leave?" Saddle laughed coarsely. "Good luck, son."

"More or less, that's the idea." I grinned menacingly. "I just need to convince them that we can handle ourselves without their supervision."

"Will you be able to pull that off?" Dee doubted.

"Trust me. I was able to marry you to your former zebra employee, so I think this should be a piece of cake." I laughed dimly.

"Half-zebra, if you don't mind." Nadyr replied.

"Whatever, my point stands."

"Fine, we'll do it your way." Dee nodded. "I don't think we have any better ideas, do we?"

Dee looked at Saddle, expecting a response from the grumpy stallion. When he noticed her intent, he looked at the floor and mumbled.

"No... I can't think of any."

"Then I suggest you get moving, Farsight. What will you need to do this?"

"I don't want you to move any significant number of troops. That would make Verrazano think we're going after him. A small unit would be able to break through their lines and assault the Diamonds before he's able to either fortify his position or flee. I think that Ampera should be enough to let us get to our target."

"I see. Are you going alone? Apart from Ampera, I mean."

"Well, if Nadyr and Rose want to join me, I'd be delighted." I winked.

"Count me in." Rose smiled.

"I won't let you down, bro." Nadyr looked at Dee. "If that is alright with you, honey."

"Go ahead, darling. Just take care." Dee nodded.

"By the way, Dee, where's Metronome?" I asked. "I haven't seen her around."

Dee's muzzle curled in anger while she looked back at the map on the table.

"She's at the Fort, recovering from a bullet to the chest. She was on the street when the Ferraturas assaulted the gates."

"Hey, Dee, don't feel guilty." Saddle intervened. "LaRoche took one to the head. They caught us by surprise, and there was nothing we could do about it. At least she's alive, and she's in good hooves."

"I'll have to agree with Saddle on that one." I nodded. "If we had seen it coming, we would all have been ready, but that's the thing with surprise attacks... You can't blame yourself for not having seen what nopony knew, except for the Ferraturas."

"Ugh... I know you're right, but she was a true friend." Dee grumbled in angst.

"Dee, she's not dead yet." Nadyr said soothingly. "Have faith on the Healers, they will do their job."

"It's out of your control now, Dee. You should... we should focus on solving the problem that occupies us. That's far more relevant for our future."

"Listen to him, Dee." Nadyr rubbed Dee's mane in a loving gesture. "Please."

Dee nodded rashly and clenched her muzzle in anger.

"Farsight, take Ampera and whatever supplies you may need." Her voice was cold and hard as steel, and her eyes claimed for blood. "Bring me that Verrazano's head."

"With pleasure." I nodded.

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Ampera was still patrolling the main street while giving hell to the entrenched enemies when we returned to the battlefield. She was vital for our mission, as she was probably the only thing that would give us the chance to reach the Four Little Diamonds without getting shot to death from multiple angles. We could have used Lavender's shield spell, but considering the damage it dealt to the filly, that was no good idea.

The former Ranger saw us and galloped to join us at the Town Hall, moving as if the armor

was made of paper, since she didn't seem to be hindered at any way by the thick construction of steel she wore on her. I greeted her with a swift nod and got ready to explain the situation. The sooner we got on the move, the better it would be.

"So, what was Dee's decision?" she asked.

"There has been a slight change of plans." I replied. "Saddle mentioned that a leader of the Ferratura Family was in charge of the attack, and that he's entrenched in the Four Little Diamonds."

"That does alter the status of battle, sure." Ampera nodded. "The plan is to take him out, I presume?"

"Exactly. With him dead, we suppose that the rest of the grunts will surrender, or at least they'll suffer a major backlash that will give us the chance to bring them to a defeat."

"In theory, that should work, yes."

"Besides, there's the problem of the incoming NER army."

"I had heard rumours... is that true?"

"Apparently, the Republican forces have crossed the Divide lately. They should be here in a matter of hours."

"Hours? That's a completely different scenario." Ampera's tone became somber. "We can't afford to get entangled in such a conflict."

"That is precisely why we need to take out Verrazano as soon as possible."

"Verrazano?"

"The Ferratura chieftain. He's the family heir, so that should be a major hit."

"Major indeed." Ampera nodded. "Let's not waste any more time then. Form up behind me and watch the sides, we are going to walk into heavy fire!"

We began walking in a rhombus-shaped formation, advancing back to back. Ampera led the way, with Nadyr and me to each side, with Rose closing the pack. As soon as we set foot in the main avenue, the constant whizzing of bullets became more and more intense, with loose shots impacting on the tarmac beneath our hooves or whistling past our hides. A step in the wrong direction could be fatal, but the Ranger was like a magnet to the bullets.

"They've brought a lot of ponypower." Ampera whistled inside her armor. "How are you bucks doing back there?"

"Still unharmed." Nadyr was concentrating on keeping a steady aim with his gun in his muzzle.

"I'm OK, Ampera!" Rose replied.

"No problems here." I said, while keeping an eye out on the E.F.S. A lot of red dots flashed and moved around us, but the main problem of the Stable-Tec system was that it didn't consider enemy altitude; and in our situation, many Ferratura goons were hiding in the higher floors of the buildings.

"Gunner post at eleven!" Ampera yelled. "Get down!"

I didn't hesitate to dive and squish myself against the cold and dirty tarmac, since Ampera wasn't the kind of pony that would exaggerate a combat threat. An instant after, the roar of a machine gun deafened me and a hail of bullets flew over us. Nadyr and Rose were also ducking behind the armored mare, who stood defiantly returning fire with her miniguns.

"Ampera, can you take them out?" I asked.

"They're pretty dug in! I'm not being able to cause them any damage!"

"Keep them concentrated on you, I have an idea!"

I crawled towards the nearby block, hoping that the ponies that were manning the gunner post wouldn't notice me moving out of cover, while Ampera intensified her attack to gain their attention. A spray of bullets landed close to my head, throwing bits of powdered brick and cement on my head, and I couldn't repress a sigh of relief and fear. As soon as I put a forehoof inside the open door of the building, I leapt forth with all my strength and rolled into the staircase, away from the bullet hell.

I found myself inside one of the apartment blocks that had been recently renewed. The walls had been covered with white paint, the floors had been cleaned and properly tiled, and the doors looked new and strong. Many of the apartments had been opened by force, and splinters of wood were lying on the floor, meaning a present danger for anypony who trotted carelessly through the aisle.

I crawled carefully while moving inside the building. Whoever had entered and razed the place was still in there, as the E.F.S. showed activity at a very close range. I used my magic to pick up a shard of glass that was lying on the floor, since I didn't want to use my rifle unless it was strictly necessary. Close combat was something that I simply abhorred, but silence was crucial not to get pounded by some goon with a cleaver.

Two voices were chatting loudly in the uppermost floor, while I climbed the stairs as cautiously as possible. Two stallions, judging by the tone.

"So I told her: honey, I've paid half a week's wage for you, so you'd better get down there and suck it like a champ."

"And what was her reply?"



"She threatened to call his stallion... what was his name now? Fury... Furious... oh, whatever. She said he was going to beat me to a pulp."

"Did she do it?"

"Whoa, easy, fella. Let me tell you the whole story... I laugh and I reply: Do you know who I work for, sweetheart? See this winged horseshoe? When your daddy comes and sees this he's going to poop his pants!"

"Yeah, well, and?"

"What do you mean by 'well, and?'"

"You're constantly delaying the ending. I want to know what happened!"

"Oh, she gave in. Like hell she did; and let me tell you something, that mare does magic with her tongue!"

"You've got to introduce her to me."

"After what I did to her, I think she won't even want to see me from the other end of the Strip. Tough luck, fella."

I had reached the room where the two grunts were discussing past anecdotes. One looked down the window with a rifle perched on the edge, while the other patrolled up and down with a smile on his face. That should be the lucky pony who had been telling the story. I kept out of his sight while he was looking in my direction, and as soon as he turned his back on me, I crawled towards him.

"So, as I was saying, I swear I've never had a better time in my... GAAAGH!"

That last word had come out when I cut his throat open from behind with the glass shard. The other pony turned around swiftly as he heard his companion's gasp, but I was already pointing at him with my rifle.

"Sweet dreams." I smiled evilly and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

The bullet hit the Ferratura goon in one eye, sending him stumbling backwards with a nasty wound in his face, then he lost balance and fell to the side. I galloped to the window and checked the situation below. The gunner post and Ampera kept firing at each other in a stalemate, while Nadyr and Rose tried to hunt lone snipers. I aimed my sniper rifle at the gunner and held my breath for a better aim, then pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

The machine gun stuttered and went silent as the pony behind it was taken down by my

bullet. Ampera looked at me from below and nodded in approval. I didn't waste my time and I galloped back down to meet my companions. Now, I am aware that I put myself on the line there, as I hadn't checked for more goons on the remaining rooms, but I was able to leave the building unscathed. Come to think of it, though, if there were any more ponies inside the block, they would have heard my fight, and they would have come to aid.

"Nice job, Farsight." Ampera congratulated me. "Now we should have open road to the Diamonds."

"Shouldn't we expect more defences the deeper we get?" I asked.

"That is what logic dictates, but I hardly think that these ponies are doing things by the book." Ampera shook her head. "Besides, we have broken through their lines without causing much of an alarm. By the time they notice that a gunner post has been defeated, we will be knocking at their door."

"Fair enough, but..." I noticed silhouettes on a rooftop. "Ampera, snipers at two."

"I copy." Ampera aimed her miniguns and fired a barrage. "No more."

We kept advancing at a slow but steady pace. Right as the former Steel Ranger had predicted, the presence of Ferratura forces diminished as we got closer to the Diamonds, their alleged stronghold. It was coherent with a limited-unit situation, and Verrazano had chosen to keep the enemies at bay by being offensive. Not that it was a surprise, really.

The Diamonds kept being the same ugly and murky place as it had always been; it didn't really seem as if the whole renovation trend that Dee had started had been of any effect there. It wasn't helpful that the Ferraturas had turned the building into a sort of fortified gunning post, with snipers in every corner and grunts patrolling the street up and down. Getting into the Casino would definitely not be easy.

"Hm... we won't be able to storm the front door." Ampera mumbled. "I can punch through it, but you would get caught in the crossfire."

"Then punch through it!" I replied. "Can your armor withstand the situation?"

"The T-66B is the best armor that a Ranger ever envisioned." Ampera boasted. "If it can't break through a small barricade, then I guess I'd better go home and be a family mare."

"Good, I trust you." I smiled. "While you knock at their door, we'll try to sneak through a side entrance."

"Oldest trick in the book, Farsight." Ampera whined. "Do you seriously think it will work?"

"It will have to." I shrugged.

"Besides," Rose added, "if Verrazano is as thick as we think he is, he'll be concentrated on repelling you instead of paying attention to his back."

"Understood." Ampera nodded, then hit the chestplate of the armor with a forehoof. "Steel and fire, comrades."

"Steel and fire, Ranger Von Ohm." I nodded solemnly. "Steel and fire."

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Ampera's twin miniguns roared like thunder while she advanced head on towards the main gates of the Diamonds. The sight of a Steel Ranger marching at a steady pace with all its firepower raging was capable of causing awe in anypony watching it, no matter how weathered it was. I prayed to Celestia never to have to fight any Ranger as we galloped into the side streets that surrounded the Casino.

A backdoor was all we needed, a way to get into the enemy stronghold while our companion kept the troops busy at the front. We moved quickly and kept our eyes and ears open, for a sidetracked sniper could spot us and put us in some serious trouble. Rose went up in front, having left control to Lavender, who seemed eager to fight, while Nadyr closed the rear. I concentrated on searching for a possible entrance: a window, a trapdoor, something that wasn't barred would be enough.

Suddenly, Lavender leapt and galloped forward, without even worrying about snipers and such dangers, and turned the corner of the Diamonds, forcing us to follow her hastily. When we got to her, she was holding a metal door open with her magic, while waiting for us with a smile on her face.

"Gentlecolts, I don't have all day." She acted smug.

"Did you know of this place?" I asked, surprised.

"Of course. Remember when I had to scavenge and spy while you fiddled around with the gangs?"

"You found out about this door then?"

"Precisely. I came across it one day, while taking a walk to know which alleys could be traversed and which were blocked by rubble. Don't tell me why I remembered this particular door, but here it is."

"You could have told us, you know?"

"Ugh, that was in Rose's memory." Lavender sighed. "I still can't reach all the corners of her mind, the same way that she can't reach mine, but it's all a matter of time. For now, you should be thankful for it!"

"Fine, you found the door." Nadyr groaned. "Would you please stop arguing about these things and get a bloody move on?"

"Sure, sure." I nodded. "Mares first."

Lavender giggled eerily and walked inside, with us two following her closely. We had gotten into a room covered in white tiles, with metallic tables and cookers on the sides. Of course, it was the kitchen of the Casino, and the door we had crossed must have been the supply door. The place was torn apart, with all the instruments lying around the floor and the cupboards open and ransacked.

"I remember having eaten here once." I mumbled. "It was awful."

"I agree." Nadyr nodded.

"Don't you think this isn't the time or place?" Lavender groaned from the door.

We nodded and followed the irate filly into a corridor, always working as a team and keeping all the corners covered. The constant gunfire and swearing let us know that the ponies guarding the building were concentrated in keeping Ampera under control, but by the anger with which the curse words were being spewed, I had the feeling that the Ranger was about to breach the doors.

We took a peek at the main hall, where standup comedy shows were enacted every night, and we saw it turned into a series of makeshift trenches, with tables toppled and put together forming walls of wood. However, after having seen what Ranger firepower was able to develop, I hardly believed that the ponies behind them would actually stand a chance.

"Not this way..." I mumbled.

"Nnnnope." Lavender shook her head.

"What should we do now? Should we wait for Ampera to come knocking?" Nadyr asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Let's see if we can reach the high floor."

We carried on down the corridor, checking every room for possible enemies, but apparently all of them were moving to the front end of the Casino. We heard hoofsteps above us, nervous orders being issued here and there, and the constant barrage of fire of Ampera's miniguns drilling on our eardrums. At the end of the corridor, we found a service staircase that had been locked to avoid anypony sneaking from behind.

"Locked." Nadyr stated. "I'm out of bobby pins."

"So much for our sneaky approach." Lavender grunted.

"Maybe not." I mumbled.

**BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!**

The door swung open, with the frame almost turned to sawdust by my rifle bullets. It hadn't

been silent or elegant, but the door was open. Nadyr was looking at me about to freak out.

"Are you crazy?" he roared.

"With the noise outside, I don't think anypony will have noticed." I replied. "Just in case, be ready for company, though."

I galloped upstairs with Lavender and Nadyr backing me up, with my rifle ready to fire at anything that moved in front of me. On the top floor, I saw Ferratura goons gallop towards the front hall, not even paying us the least bit of attention. We only needed to worry about finding Verrazano.

"STEEEL AND FIREEEEE!" Ampera's voice roared through all the corridors.

"I guess that she's finally broken in." Lavender grinned.

"Then let's go to the restaurant at the entry. I bet my caps that Verrazano is in there." I said.

We galloped as quickly as possible into the main battlefield, while we heard the screams and wails of Ferratura goons that were being mowed down mercilessly by the Ranger's fire. When I crossed the final door and arrived at the mezzanine that overlooked the gates, I saw a certain fat and balding stallion with a gun on his muzzle firing constantly at our ally below. With a smirk, I pointed my rifle at his head and whistled.

"I'm coming for you, Verrazano!" I cooed.

The Ferratura chieftain turned his head in surprise when he heard his name and almost instantly ducked, swaying my bullet with grace. I almost dropped my jaw in awe. To be so fat, he was very quick and agile. I could never have expected that!

"Here you are, you prick!" He spat and galloped towards me at full speed.

I needed to hit him, before he got close... But he moved too fast, I couldn't take aim! I needed to do something before...

"OOF!"

It felt like being bucked by a dozen of ponies at the same time. Verrazano's tackle had caught me in a precarious balance and the sheer force of his mass sent me rolling onto the floor, and my rifle flew away from my range. I tried to recover, but I felt dizzy from the hit and the Ferratura pony had already pinned me down with a hoof on my chest.

"You aren't so cocky now, are you?" Verrazano grinned. "You are a thinker... I want to see what you think, with my own eyes."

I shook and fought to free myself, but his weight was enough to cancel my force. Meanwhile, he grabbed his pistol and aimed it at my head, its cannon promising a swift

death as soon as he pulled the trigger. So this is it, I thought. I rolled the dice and this time it was my turn to lose. I had been in a similar situation not so long ago, when Goldie's goons had me tied up to a bedframe. Then, Stuka had saved me, but now...

"Farsight!" Nadyr's voice came from somewhere I couldn't see.

**BANG!**

The pain engulfed me like a wave of fire, making my body curl and my mind toil as it went from my leg towards the... from my leg? Hadn't Verrazano been pointing at my head. Still gasping for air, I dared to open one eye and saw that the fat Ferratura wasn't on top of me anymore, but fighting Nadyr hoof to hoof.

"Farsight, don't move!" Rose yelled.

I looked for the filly while tears rolled in my eyes. The pain was horrible, and I was moaning without control in a pitch that I would have found insufferable at any other circumstance. I moved my head and saw Rose using her magic on my right hindleg, which now looked like true mincemeat. The bone was sticking out in many places, and blood was flowing from the open wound, no matter what my filly companion did to keep it inside.

"What...?" I asked.

"Hush now." Rose looked at me sternly. "Verrazano had hollow rounds loaded into his pistol. If Nadyr hadn't bucked him on the side you would be dead. Instead, well, that leg is going to need some major repairs..."

"Urgh..." I sighed and let my head fall to the side.

I watched the fight between Nadyr and Verrazano as if it were a holomovie down at the Stable. The truth is that I almost couldn't feel a thing, no idea whether it might have been Rose's doing or my body just shutting down by the loss of blood; but at least my eyes and ears worked properly.

"All right, fatso." Nadyr smiled. "Time for some zebra mojo to put you in your place."

"Dickwad." Verrazano growled, his muzzle wet from his own blood. "Do you think you can defeat me? I am the strongest pony in New Pegasus!"

"No you're not." My companion laughed. "You're a bowl of jello, Verrazano, and I'm going to kick you into a pulp!"

"NO YOU WON'T!"

Verrazano leapt forward in another demonstration of his uncanny agility, but Nadyr was far more nimble and quick in movements. I remembered his show on the Wasteland, when he took out a whole pack of Cazadorables without a single scratch, and I smiled faintly thinking about what the Ferratura pony was about to experience.

Nadyr pranced and stood on his hindlegs, changing his center of mass with speed and dexterity, while launching deadly forehoofs to the face of Verrazano, who got pummeled like crazy. The fat stallion could hardly avoid the lightning-fast attacks of the half-zebra, and tried to offer the harder parts of his body as the landing point for the attacks. Every now and then, Verrazano would leap forward and charge against Nadyr, trying to destabilize him, but the zebra would roll aside and begin his attack routine once again.

In a certain way, maybe because the pain was clouding my mind, I found it strangely beautiful. It had a mysterious charm, like a dance against death performed by somepony very confident, or very reckless, in which no movement was in vain. Every leap, every step, every attack that Nadyr launched was meant to do something to Verrazano: either tire him, or confuse him, or harm him.

The fat Ferratura, on the other hoof, looked like a savage beast trying to fend off a particularly annoying bug, only to find out that the little nuisance was draining his energy away and leaving him helpless for another round of punishment. Verrazano was strong and powerful, there was no arguing that, but he lacked the finesse that my companion had when it came to fighting.

"What is it, sonny?" Nadyr chuckled. "Are you tired? Do you need to go to your mama for some cuddles?"

"Leave Mamma out of this!" Verrazano roared.

"Why? She and I are good friends! You should have seen how clingy she was last night!"

"I will teach you some RESPECT!"

I tried to smile, but my face didn't respond. It was a lousy way of getting an enemy angry and careless, but it seemed that Verrazano worked in response to simpler stimuli. The fat stallion charged with even less vision than before, and Nadyr could easily dodge him and give him another beating before he was even ready to focus on defending himself.

The half zebra seemed to be enjoying the moment, judging by the broad smile that stood on his face as he jumped and slithered around. I had the feeling that he was trying to find an open way to deliver a final blow, something that would leave Verrazano open and defenceless for a shot in the face, but the large Ferratura brother was being able to keep a certain level of resistance to Nadyr's attacks.

"Good, good, I had never had to fight for so long!" Nadyr laughed. "You're proving to be a worthy opponent!"

"I'm going to crush you!" Verrazano spat blood.

"Why are you so basic in your threats? That is something I just can't understand." Nadyr huffed and delivered another one-two forehooves onto the balding stallion's face. "Why not try something like 'I'm going to nail you ass'? That would be original for once!"

"WAAARGH!" Verrazano charged once again.

"Seriously, you're getting on my nerves."

Nadyr swayed a couple of bucks to the head and danced around the exhausted enemy while whistling a tune. He was looking for an opening, trying to catch the weak spot that would give him room to attack. In the meantime, he tried to annoy Verrazano in order to break his concentration. I had to admit that he wasn't as thick as I had expected him to be.

Suddenly, I believed to see something wrong in Ferratura's stance. His left side remained unguarded for a second after he launched a charging attack, and that could be used by Nadyr to deliver a final blow. I was very weak and in pain, but he needed to know what I had seen, so I tried to move a bit.

"What is it, Farsight?" Rose asked.

"Left..." I mumbled. "After charge..."

"OK." Rose nodded and turned to Nadyr. "Watch his left side when he charges!"

Nadyr nodded and switched stance, putting weight on his right side. Verrazano hadn't heard Rose's call, or he hadn't paid attention properly, and he charged blindly at Nadyr. Instead of barely dodging the attack, the half zebra leapt to the front, grabbed Verrazano from the neck and somersaulted from right to left, twisting the fat Ferratura's neck with massive strength due to his inertia. I could clearly hear the snap of the bones when they broke, and Verrazano stared blankly in surprise as life ended for him in a fairly picturesque way.

With our enemy dead, I let my head fall backwards and sighed. The whole chaos of the casino slowly washed away as the grunts realized that their feared leader was lying dead on the mezzanine, and the ones that remained alive and unharmed began to drop down their guns in surrender. Victory at last.

"Well, that's a job well done!" I heard Ampera trotting upstairs.

"Ampera, Farsight's wounded!" Rose cried.

"What in the..." Ampera said. "Wow, that leg looks bad. He's going to need some serious patching up. Take him to the Fort and tell Mixer that I will bring the spare parts he needs."

"Understood!" Rose replied.

"Come on, bro, let's get you to a proper doctor." Nadyr came by smiling and grabbed me by the neck. I felt being lifted both by magic and brute force, and I was deposited on somepony's back. From the faint smell of sweat coming from it, I recognized it was Nadyr who was carrying me.

"Rest now, Farsight. You're going to be fine." Rose's soothing voice came to me as we



descended the stairs.

Yes, I needed to rest, but there were many things clouding my mind. How was the battle going on New Pegasus? When would the NER arrive in town, and who would stop them from taking over it? How were the Ferraturas going to react to Verrazano's death? Would the roboponies be able to defend themselves without proper guidance? My head felt dizzy and my sight went black. My last thought before losing consciousness was a silent curse to my bad luck. All the stages of my plan had clicked together, and now, so close to the end, I was on the verge of losing everything! It simply couldn't be... happening...

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Note: Reputation change

Freedom Field: Idolized. Your actions have saved the township.

Ferratura Family: Feared and hated. The death of Verrazano has taught the family that you and your friends are no joke.