

# **Fallout Equestria: Viva Las Pegasus**

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## **Synopsis:**

When the megaspells fell, everything died, but New Pegasus endured. The city of mobsters, crime, vice and gambling survived and thrived during the long balefire winter. Twenty years after the Day of Sunshine and Rainbows, New Pegasus is still a beacon in the middle of the Neighvada Desert, a pot of gold for whoever can get his hooves on it.

My name is Farsight, and I know everything about the dark secrets that the neon billboards don't show... I've seen the best and the worst; and I've pulled many strings. In my world, there are no heroes or villains, just ponies with ambitions and goals that can be bent to one's interest; for I know an undeniable truth: Everypony has a plan. Allow me to show you how I worked my way out of the gutter, how I climbed to the top of the ladder... and how I fell.

## *Foreword: A Note From The Author*

Hi there!

I have finally reached that point in which I can write the two fateful words on the bottom of the page: "**THE END**", and I must say that this has been a really daunting experience, from the beginning to the end. It has taken me more than a year to complete it, and I have learnt quite a lot in the way. I must admit that I have never been a true brony, and I just happened to stumble upon Fallout Equestria... However, it made me want to write a story of my own. After all this time and effort, I have told Farsight's story from the beginning to the end, with its ups and downs, and even if I haven't been able to attract much attention, I have fulfilled my determination of finishing what I started.

Of course, I couldn't have done this without help, and I want to thank some of you personally:

- **Kkat**, thanks for creating such a magnificent setting for us to write in. Your enthralling story and your perfect crossover between Fallout and MLP has given birth to a community of its own, and for that, I feel in your debt.
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- **HaileTheKing**, thanks for honoring me with a sidfic to VLP.
- **NitoKa**, thanks for having agreed on making the audiobook to this story.
- **GhostMK1**, thanks for your corrections.

And to all of you who have read and commented, who have shown your interest for this little project of mine, you have my gratitude. Now and forever, thank you.

**S3rb4n**

## *Prologue: Viva Las Pegasus*

*Excerpt from the combat diary of Sunlight Forger, Sergeant of the 6th Recon Squad "Dusk Rangers" of the New Equestrian Republic:*

1400 hours. We've reached detonation point. Rad levels are stable, no signs of Taint or mutated wildlife of any kind. Honestly, I really don't know what Captain Stonetree was expecting to find down here apart from rubble, bones, and ash. I guess he wanted closure for what happened here. NER's finest recon squads have been stuck shifting through debris here for four months though. There has to be some better reason for this.

1811 hours. Fried the lock of a trapdoor and uncovered a passage leading to an underground level. We searched for survivors, but ended up fending off the local automated defense systems, we've only found a terminal and a locked safe.

This might be what Captain Stonetree wants us to find. The terminal contains a brief text log and the command to open the locked safe. The vault, on the other hand, contains probably the most complete model Stable-Tec PipBuck I've ever seen. It has both the memory mod and extended storage. The content of the log-file from the terminal is copy-pasted below:

*Congratulations. If you're reading this, then you have no doubt been able to breach the security of this bunker. I can only assume you are no raider and are definitely interested in what I've got to say. Probably because you're looking for answers to what happened to New Pegasus, and no doubt you know my role in its destruction. All the details are in the PipBuck that lies now inside the safe. Basically, it's a memory storage device with all my life in it.*

*There are some things you must know first, though. I know I'm looked upon with disgust, as the evil traitor that selfishly abandoned his friends after having used them for his own devices. That is no lie. I know I was no role model. Actually, many times I look back at my life in shame and regret. Don't get me wrong, though. I don't regret any of my actions. I regret not having enjoyed the little moments of true happiness I had in this soulless world we live in.*

*That doesn't matter anymore, since I'm already dead and you're looking at a screen inside a rad-proof vault under the ruins of what once was a beacon of light in the middle of the Wasteland. My feelings won't bring back the dead, won't avenge the injustice. However, I needed to tell my story, I needed to keep a record of what I went through in this world. I wasn't always like the pony the world says I was. I once was a peaceful colt with a bright future in the peace of a Stable. Life is a harsh mistress, though, and she taught me a great lesson. Don't fight the power. And you know what? I rebelled. I fought the power with all my might, until I became the power; then others fought me.*

*And even if the former is true, the lesson of my life is another. Trust nopony, because everypony lies. Everypony is selfish in the Wasteland. Everypony is cruel. Everypony is disloyal. Everypony is dishonest. Keep your friends close, and your foes closer.*

*However, I think I'm getting carried away with philosophy, which isn't my intent at all. As I've said, I'm here to tell a story, the story of my life, and of how I came to be the leader of New Pegasus, just to end up destroying it. Take a look at my PipBuck and you'll see what I have to say.*

*Farsight.*

2000 hours. We're back in basecamp, and I've decided to activate the PipBuck to find out what we have been digging for. I've latched it to my hoof in order to be able to search the contents of the memory array. All checks positive, device running. Accessing data storage. Life Diary found, starting playback...

*\*CLICK!\**

# ***ACT I: DAWN***

## *Chapter 1: The Sound of Silence*

*Good evening everypony, this is Mister New Pegasus speaking, bringing you the latest news and the sweetest tunes to comfort your weary souls. Today has been a remarkable day for the great city of New Pegasus! The flagship casino of the New Pegasus Strip, the Platinum Horseshoe, has reopened to the grand public after decades of silence and mysteries. The once believed dead owner of this juggernaut of pony entertainment, Full House, has had the deference to send message to this humble pony here. I will not play it, as per his request, but I will tell you what he told me. He told me that the Horseshoe is now the best casino in town, the one with the best facilities, the comfiest rooms, the most entertaining sideshows and the biggest, juiciest prizes. Everypony is welcome to the new Horseshoe!”*

*“In other news, the City Board has decided to welcome the ever growing New Equestrian Republic to establish a diplomatic delegation within the city walls, provided they respect the independence and self-govern of the city. So, dear citizens of New Pegasus, if you happen to see ponies wearing uniforms with a two-headed unicorn, don’t go running back to your homes and set up the barricades! These soldiers are friendly and welcome, as long as the City Board doesn’t say different. According to the City Board, the NER will have a permanent Embassy in the northern end of the Strip, close to the walls.”*

*“However, as a nasty side effect of this diplomatic maneuver, the City Security Force will start conducting thorough Citizenship checks, so don’t forget to carry your Citizen Card or Badge with you at all times. You risk being kicked out of this little piece of paradise!”*

*“Now, to all our everyday listeners and to the newcomers, here’s something fresh out of the oven. Coming directly from Manehattan, broadcast by the very DJ Pon-3 himself, here is Velvet Remedy’s last hit. Remember, this is New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, straight into your soul...”*

“Farsight,” the Overmare started speaking in a rather formal tone, “let me express my infinite gratitude for your sacrifice today. Rest assured that the lives of the ponies of Stable 188 are forever in debt with you. We shall never forget you, and what you’ve done for us.”

I looked at the Overmare. I wasn’t angry, nor sad, not even scared; but I knew that fear would come to me as soon as the gate closed behind my back. At that instant, every negative feeling I harbored towards the Stable, its organization, its rules and ways, and most of all, towards the Overmare, were substituted for pure disappointment and bitterness. She had driven me into a total checkmate, turned me into a pariah in my own home, crushed my aspirations of doing something good for the rest; and finally, she was throwing me to my death.

“Overmare,” I replied, my teeth clenched, looking at her in pure, utter hate, “I really hope you’ll have the guts to tell that to your filly if she gets picked.”

I turned and crossed the gate, entering the endless dark void. I looked back to see the gate slam shut behind me, but... did I spot a faint grin on the Overmare’s face?

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Darkness. All around.

When the heavy door slammed shut behind me, the world faded to black. There was nothing but darkness and silence, which made me notice that the Stable gates were magnificent sound isolators. I bet the Dwellers could be throwing a massive party right behind the door and I wouldn’t even notice.

I stood still for... how long? I didn’t know, but then again, how was I to know, being surrounded by pitch-black darkness, without a single reference to start? As I had imagined before, I found myself shaking in utter fear. What could lie before me? I couldn’t see a single thing, I couldn’t hear a single thing, and I damn sure couldn’t feel a single thing; and what was even worse, I couldn’t think clearly. My imagination had gone berserk and was starting to picture eldritch horrors that were just a step away from me, waiting to drag me to their dark pits to tear me apart.

I felt my guts churn once again, this time more violently, and I could even taste the vomit coming up my throat, then I threw up. Once. Twice. Three times; until I had nothing left in my stomach. I could feel my entire body shaking, both from fear and weakness. Then came the tears. I did nothing to hold them back, I just let them flood my eyes and slip down my cheeks. I kicked and wailed and cried like a little foal, damning all the Stable Dwellers to a slow and painful death, blaming their hypocrisy as the culprit of my fate. I stomped the floor with my hooves and let my rage loose by wailing like crazy. Maybe it wasn't the most mature of actions, but it helped me feel a bit better.

I slowly started thinking about my life in the Stable. Did I miss it? I guess I did, but I wasn't that sure, anyway. It was safe, it was comfortable, and food was guaranteed as long as things didn't mess up, so it was good overall. However, I had been a loner for all my life, with no real friends, only artificial relationships product of my hard work trying to grasp the principles of speech and charisma. Looking back at it, I couldn't remember the name of a mare or a buck that had positively expressed fondness towards me. No, no pony liked me in there. I felt tears fill my eyes again, but this time it wasn't fear what fueled them, nor rage. It was sorrow, it was the regret for having lost everything I'd never had.

Then, the grin of the Overmare came to my mind. I had seen it, I had no doubt. Why was she smiling, if the moment was meant to be one of total solemnity or even sorrow? As Overmare, she was sending one of the Dwellers of her Stable to a most certain death! How could she find that amusing at all? Or maybe it wasn't amusement what made her grin.

...No. No, no, no! NO! I refused to think that, there was no way she could have rigged the election! As much as I hated her, I wanted to believe she had a tiny bit of decency in her. However, a little voice in my head told me I was a fool for believing it. What if mine wasn't the first election she had rigged? How come all her "friends" were so calm at the moment of the Lottery? Wasn't that suspicious? The very thought of it made me shake in anger. That disgusting bitch! If I could have put my hooves on her that very moment, I would have torn her to shreds.

I breathed deep two or three times to calm myself down, and remembered about the PipBuck I was wearing. When I was given the device, the instructor pony told us that it had a light function. How could I have forgotten that? I operated the knob using my telekinesis, which made the PipBuck start glowing with a faint golden light. Now that things weren't pitch black, I could see the world around me, and I was quite surprised to see I wasn't out in the open as I had thought, but in some sort of underground service tunnel, four walls of concrete that led to a place unknown. Other than that (oh, yes, and my fresh vomit in the floor), there was nothing to be seen or done here.

One hoof after another, I slowly crept into the dark tunnel, hoping there would not be any monsters out there. The records in the Stable spoke about the horrible effect of radiation on living beings, the mutation, the warped abominations that came out of the tests performed before the War. For all I knew, those horrors could be easily roaming the world right now. However, my fears were soon over, since the tunnel ended abruptly in a concrete wall with a ladder leading to a ponyhole in the ceiling. Suddenly, my PipBuck emitted a faint beep. I looked at it to see that the map function had started working and showed that I was standing on... Stable 188. Obvious. This led me to think that the map had to have been recorded sometime before or during the War, and as well as somepony had added Stable 188 to the database, other locations should be in there as well.

What was I going to do now, I wondered. I needed a goal in my life, something to strive for, and right now I had nothing, since there was no returning into my former life, as bad as it could be. However, I didn't know what awaited ahead, and honestly, I was scared of whatever I could face when I left the tunnel, but I found something in the deep of my mind that fueled me; I found the wish for vengeance. Something inside me told me that I would come back to the Stable someday, and that the Overmare would have to pay for casting me out. First, though, I had to survive to see that day.

Leaving those thoughts aside, I moved the ponyhole cover in order to find a way out of the tunnel. The faint blue glow of my horn flooded the room, casting tilting shadows of myself and of the ladder in the process. The ponyhole cover moved aside, and a stream of light entered the tunnel from above. Could that be... sunlight? Maybe all I had read and all that the Overmare had told us was a lie? Maybe the world outside was

still green and sunny? After having lived a whole life underground, would I get to see the light of day, the power of the Goddess? Almost tripping from the excitement, I climbed the ladder and exited the tunnel.

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“\*Bleep!\* You have discovered Las Pegasus Strip!” The PipBuck beeped and let me know I was somewhere other than in Stable 188, but I was too busy to actually notice it. My eyes wandered around in delight, from light to light. It was not sunlight, as I had thought in the first glance. It was pure and simple magic, entire buildings lit like torches, from top to bottom, showing massive, glowing billboards that announced entertainers, singers, magicians, comedians, exhibitions, and almost all over the place, gambling. This was Las Pegasus, the Capital of Fun in Equestria, as the records said.

My mind was suffering a total breakdown. How was this possible? Wasn't this supposed to be a deserted Wasteland where ponies had a hard time surviving? What kind of fucked-up mockery was this? There had to be a catch somewhere. Either the inhabitants were all dead, or they were cannibals waiting for ponies to come out of the Stable (please, Celestia, don't let it be like that) or the whole Stable was a sort of absurd behavioral experiment. Nothing seemed to add up, and I felt so confused at the moment that I almost felt the urge to turn around and knock the Stable door to tell them there was a city above.

When I came out of the ponyhole, I found myself in a small dead-end street between two cinder block buildings, their walls smeared with graffiti that said things such as “NER go home!” or “Who is Full House?”. The paintings were recent, so that ruled out the idea of the city being deserted. I had honestly no idea what they were talking about. NER? What in Equestria could that actually mean? And who could Full House be? Trying to put my thoughts in order, I left the alley to enter into the main street.

It was plain and simply glorious. Coming out of the darkness of the underground corridor, I found myself in a world of blinding lights. My jaw opened wide in amazement as I started looking around, trying to grasp as much of this new, breathtaking world as possible. This had nothing to do with the picture I had of the Wasteland. Instead of a barren, lifeless desert; I encountered a vibrant, living city where the gleam and glory of the Past still endured.

The lights were blinding, the music was harmonious, the mares were beautiful and the stallions dressed in style. As far as my eyes could see, the avenue continued, surrounded by buildings, each one bigger and more lavish than the previous. There were bars, fancy restaurants, casinos, hotels, dressmakers, general stores... but mostly casinos. I could count up to six of them in a ten minute trot down the Strip. Everything looked so fancy, so attractive...

A sudden rumble of my stomach reminded me that I hadn't eaten anything since that morning, and come to think of it, after having been expelled from the Stable I had thrown up so many times I doubted I had anything left inside me. As I was walking towards the restaurant, a buck dressed in an uncomfortable looking livery stopped me dead in my tracks. He gave me a look up and down, as if he was judging me.

“Sir,” he said, “I'm afraid I can't let you in. Your dress is not proper.”

“Proper?” I asked in disbelief. My jumpsuit was clean and tidy! Why shouldn't it be adequate?

“Yes, sir. This restaurant takes great pride on its dressing standards, and I'm afraid a... jumpsuit isn't what fits our etiquette. Besides, even in the risk of being impolite, I don't think you can afford the prices in our menu.”

Money! I had to refrain from facehoofing. And I consider myself a smart pony! I had read so much about money in the Pre-War times; I knew about trading and investment, and I even had some notions in Economy. However, I hadn't thought that there would be money involved. After all, if this city was like a pre-War one, it was reasonable that there was a pre-War economy working.

“Excuse me, sir, but I will have to ask you to leave.” The buck was looking at me with a stern face. “If you refuse, I'm afraid I'll have to call the police.”

I didn't want to mess things up from the very beginning. After all the fear I had felt when I left the Stable, somehow I saw an easy way out of the problem. This city, this Las Pegasus, could be my safe haven. If I could just find work in here, maybe I could make a living away from the dangers that were out there.

Suddenly I was feeling much more light hearted, almost cheerful. Things didn't look so bad from this angle. My happiness, however, was quickly replaced by anguish. Where could I find a job in a place like this? All my life I had been working as an accountant, a manager of ins and outs; so I had no skills like the ones a restaurant or a casino would require, and most probably, they wouldn't hire me anyway. After all, who was I but a homeless pony? Who would actually want to hire a buck that comes out of nowhere, dressed in a strange jumpsuit, who is alien to all the ways of the place? No pony, that's the answer.

I would have to try, though, since this one was a rather do-or-die situation. I slowly meditated about what I could offer to the inhabitants of this city. Fuck, Farsight, you're a smart pony, I thought; you can make out a way of finding a job. I could handle money, whatever it was called. In the Stable there was no money at all, but there were resources, such as power, water, oxygen, food or fuel. Some pony had to control the quantities, the ins and outs, the ups and downs, and all things considered money was just another resource; so I had the feeling that it could be my way of getting a job.

If not, I had computers; after all my PipBuck was especially modified to have the power of an actual terminal, if not much more. Besides, I had worked all my life in front of a terminal, and I had learned how to make those things tick. I could design programs to manage robots, to automate accounts, to deliver messages... Maybe that could be useful as well.

A sting of sorrow came to me once again. The Stable, my life... gone, forever. My life hadn't been happy in there, I know, but now I was missing it. Even in the bright lights of this city, all felt alien to me, as if I didn't really belong here. I felt darkness grasp my heart again as I remembered my daily routine. My small office, the old desk where my terminal was located, the smell of the books in the shelf... I did miss that, the simplicity of it all. I tried to hide my tears; instead, I laughed softly in irony. It's amazing how you can get to appreciate simple things when you've lost them.

And once again, thinking about the Stable brought me to my exile, or the way it had been staged. I blamed the Overmare for her actions, but a small part of me knew that I could have avoided everything by having said nothing and having been a good, obedient pony. I wanted to have my revenge, but something was starting to change in me. It wasn't the Overmare I wanted to punish, it was the system who had done this to me. I realized that the Overmare was nothing but a figurehead, the visible appendage of an invisible monster formed by the bigotry and the narrow mindedness of the Dwellers; so all of them were to blame. All of them were responsible of my fate, since none of them had stepped forward to aid me. Therefore, I would have my revenge upon all of them, that I swore.

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"I'm sorry, but I can't hire you." The fancy mare in the outfitter store shook her head, her face showing a perfectly faked sadness. "You don't have enough references."

"Enough references?" I asked in anger. "Can't you see I'm fresh out of a Stable? Do you want me to crawl back there to ask for references?"

"I don't care about what you do." Her face had wiped away all sadness to show a stern rejection. "No references, no job."

"I.."

"Now leave or I'll call the police!" She pointed a hoof at the door.

I left the store, because I didn't want to alert the police. Somehow I knew that doing so would be unwise, but I was starting to feel desperate, as my stomach was rumbling and my head was a total chaos. Ever since I had been kicked out I had been wandering the city with no actual place to go, stumbling from one shop to another, almost kneeling to beg for a job. However, I had been rejected everywhere, and I was running out of places to go. The restaurants had thrown me away because I was dirty, the outfitters had despised me because of my clothes, the hotels rejected me because they feared I could be a burglar. No matter how fancy I tried to talk, they wouldn't give me an opportunity.

And what was worse, every attempt ended up with greater chances of attracting the police towards me. With

every door closing for me, I saw my chances of survival vanish before my eyes. I wanted to scream for help, I wanted to beg for a single carrot. That was another lesson I was starting to learn: nopony cared about nopony in this outside world. The Stable had some principles of love and solidarity, nopony was left behind. This, however, was a competition. Survival was a one-pony-job, and the sooner I understood the hard truth, the better I would do; so I shook my head and tried to think straight. I'd have to look for more places. Maybe the Casinos could profit of my fancy talking.

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Have you ever tried to fancy-talk somepony that is pointing at you with a gun? That's the situation I found in all the Casinos I entered looking for a job. No, they didn't want me as a croupier because I couldn't be trusted. No, they didn't want me as a security pony because I was a wimpy colt with no experience. No, they didn't want me as a bartender because I wasn't attractive enough. And hell no, they didn't want me to handle their money. All of this said with the black, gaping mouth of a gun aimed directly at my face.

They were very clear: I wasn't welcome in town; and they wouldn't call the police, because they had other ways of handling uncomfortable intruders. A bullet to the head and the problem would be over. Then, they'd drag my corpse to the Wasteland and let the predators do their thing so, they said, I had better leave their casinos before they ran out of their agonizing patience. A wave of fear shook my body, and I swear I was close to soiling myself. The Wasteland was this as well. Beneath the blinding lights, this place was a savage society. There was little difference with what I had been taught in the Stable. All traces of love and tolerance had gone down the drain.

Scared as I was, I left each casino with a mixture of relief and despair. On the one hoof, I had barely escaped a more than probable death, but on the other hoof, I had returned to my very worrisome situation; because I had nothing to eat, no money to pay for anything, and I was starting to bring the attention of the citizens towards me. It was just a matter of time until they called the police to take the homeless pony with the Stable jumpsuit off the streets.

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After roaming the streets for a while, drowning in a spiral of my own pessimism, I stopped before a big red building with a metal roof. It wasn't as massive as the casinos, as beautiful as the outfitter shops, or as fancy as a restaurant, but it was exactly what I needed. The silver sign on the street read "Las Pegasus Public Library", but the "Las" had been badly covered with a wooden plank where the word "New" was scribbled, which made me realize the city wasn't Las Pegasus but New Pegasus. Why did they change the name in the first place? As I was reading the sign, I spotted from the corner of my eye that two robots had stopped their patrol and were looking at me. They were quite a work of engineering, indeed. The engineers had tried to resemble a pony as much as it was possible, since they had their body with the four legs and the head; but that was the limit of similarities; from there on, they were different. The front left and right legs were joint into a big wheel, and so were the back ones. The head was a monitor, like the one in my terminal, and it showed a static image of a stern-looking pony with a security officer cap on it. Somepony had finally called the police, and I assumed these devices were the ones responsible for keeping the city safe... according to whatever standards they gave to safety. I also assumed that they wouldn't make a move for me if I didn't notice I was being closely watched, so I decided to carelessly trot around the building.

My hopes of walking away unnoticed were quickly dashed, as I saw from the corner of my eye that the patrol robots had started pursuing me. They kept their distance, as if they didn't want to scare me away, but they were definitely behind me. My heart started beating faster as I tried to shake them off my tail with no good results. Why were they behind me in the first place? What had I done to be pursued? Was this the fate of the Outcasts, to be hunted down like animals in this city? I wanted to cry, but I held my tears as I tried not to attract any more attention toward myself. Suddenly, I found myself back in front of the Library, and desperate as I was, I ran into the building trying to lose the robots.

The front desk was a Pre-War work of art and craftsmanship, two tones of wood entwined themselves forming a representation of the Goddesses, Celestia and Luna, fulfilling the role of raising the sun and the moon. On the wall, a massive poster of a blindfolded pony soldier standing before a book watched over the

whole reception. Although aged and close to losing all its color, the inscription was clearly readable:

**Ignorance kills!**

Soldier, keep your mind fit!

Ministry of Arcane Science

That was, most probably, a wartime propaganda poster, if the records from the Stable were right. I stood staring at the poster, thinking on how the image symbolized my current situation, since in a way, I was running around blindfolded in a world unknown to me.

“What’s so funny about the poster?” asked a feminine voice from behind the counter.

I noticed the small golden-coated mare that was trying to stick her head above the desk. She had an apple-green mane, gracefully braided behind her head, and wore a pair of small, round glasses. I stood there looking at her without saying anything, and I guess she didn’t like my face, because she gave me a rough look.

“Hey, what is wrong with you?” she asked again.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. I got carried away,” I replied in a hurry. My voice trembled and my heart felt like it would burst. “I-I... I have a problem.”

“We all have problems, friend.” She didn’t seem very helpful. “Now make it quick, I’ve got work to do. How can I help you?”

“Help me?” I tried to smile but my face was twitching in anguish. “My name’s Farsight, I’m new here. I need a job.”

“Oh, you’re one of those Stable ponies, aren’t you?” she asked, pointing at my blue and yellow jumpsuit with her hoof.

“Yes. Yes.” I replied nervously, worried about whether that was a good or a bad thing. I didn’t know what concept they had in New Pegasus about Stable ponies. Maybe they hated them. Maybe they killed them for sport. Oh, no, please, no.

“You’re not the first one I’ve seen. In fact, I lived in there as well.”

“You WHAT?” My eyes opened wide. “How come I don’t know you?”

“I was thrown out some years ago.” She scowled. “You must have been a colt back then. Probably nothing more than a blank flank.”

“I suppose so.” I shrugged. “Could I ask you one question?”

“Tell me.” Her face showed clearly that she didn’t want to answer any questions, but she was forcing herself to be polite. Just for an old compatriot.

“Where did your family work?” I asked.

“Father worked at the reactor level. He had to deal with all the radiation and the heat. That poor sod died very young, leaving Mother and me alone.”

Fuck this, I thought. It was the same I had noticed. Only the low-class ponies were the ones prone to be cast out. The highborn would live safe and comfortably in the Stable for their whole lives.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I mumbled. “What about your mother?”

“Mother worked in the Canteen. All the day, stuck behind smoking pots, breaking her back so that the Stable could eat. But then I got picked, and I don’t know what happened to her.” I would have expected her to show some sorrow or regret, but she didn’t. Whatever she was feeling was hidden under a mask of indifference.

“If it helps, I understand.” I nodded to show that I did indeed understand. “I was thinking of getting a job, and waiting for when the next pony is cast out of the stable. Expose the truth, confront the Overmare, and maybe in the process we could learn about your mother.”

Mentioning her mother didn't seem to be a good idea at all. Tracker's jaws clenched shut in anger, giving her the look of a killer. I swear I felt my blood freeze when I tried to meet her gaze.

"Listen to me. I have been patient with you because you're a fresh outcast, but you are starting to piss me off. What's done is done and buried, and I damn sure don't want any smartypants coming here to remind me of my past."

"I am sorry. I didn't know it was something so painful for you to remember." I tried to look as pitiful as possible, since her resentment had given way to anger, and to be totally honest, I preferred the disdain she had shown in the first part of our conversation. "Please forgive me."

Tracker grunted, waved a hoof and gave me a judging look. "Stop acting, you dickhead. Let's forget about this and speak about your job. What are your abilities?" She was the same grumpy, cold-as-ice mare as before.

"My abilities?" Stupid question, but I was so nervous that I couldn't think straight.

"Yes, your abilities, stupid." She looked at me with an ironic smirk. "Because you'll have abilities, won't you?"

"I'm good with computers." That was my only card. If it didn't work...

"We already have a technician." The mare behind the counter shook her head. "Besides, these computers don't need much more than a toaster repairpony."

No! I needed to get that job! Besides, I noticed that the robots had already spotted me and were coming my way.

"Please!" I begged, tears coming to my eyes. "I need a job! Please! I NEED IT!"

"I said no, so shut up!" she barked. "Stop pestering, or I swear I'll call the police!"

What a coincidence, the two patrol bots had just entered the library and were coming for me.

"Citizenship Card, please." The bot emitted a toneless voice.

"Sorry?"

"Citizenship Card, please." Again, the same response. The other bot had flanked me in the meantime and was standing behind my back. That was it. My life was over. I prayed to the Goddesses to strike me dead.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come with us, please." The front bot turned around and the other pushed me from behind, forcing me to hastily trot out of the building. Destination, unknown.

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If I didn't know it wasn't like that, I might have thought that I had returned to my lovely Stable room. Everything around me was gray, dull and gray: gray walls, gray ceiling, gray floor, a gray mattress left on a corner of the small room. Leaving aside the fact that the place was not meant to be beautiful or comfortable, the room was in a rather good condition. No cracks on the paint, no chipped floors, no scratch marks on the walls saying "Fuck the Police" or anything like that. In fact, the only thing that differed from a standard Stable room was the small window on one of the walls, which let a beam of the blinding lights of New Pegasus enter the room, or to be more precise, the holding cell.

The bots had taken me from the Library into a small, ugly, two-storey building that stood on a sidestreet, far from the activity and glitz of the main avenue. The building itself was a cube, with no hint of aesthetics in it, just plain functionality taken to the edge of paroxysm. Offices in the first floor, barred windows on the second. The small sign in the main entrance let me know I was being dragged into the New Pegasus Police Department, accused of what I assumed was illegal immigration.

There was nothing to do in the cell, well, nothing except reading a small booklet that was lying on a corner. It was a dirty old brochure, most probably from before the War, titled *Las Pegasus and its surroundings*, and it

had been edited by the Las Pegasus Tourism Board. I hovered through the pages containing old pictures and small reference texts. Nothing too interesting, since I had other things that worried me much more, like my future. However, a small voice in my head advised me to scan the book into my PipBuck, which I did. Then, I realized I had nothing more to do, other than to fall into despair once again.

I missed the Stable; something I never thought I would, but as the hours went by, I started wondering what the Dwellers would be doing. Then I remembered my bed, warm and cozy, and tears came to my eyes as I realized I wouldn't sleep on it again; or more properly, I wouldn't sleep in a bed again. As a natural course of reason, I thought about the Overmare, and rage filled my brain. I hadn't stopped thinking about the events that led to my banishment, and minute after minute I was more and more convinced that the Lottery had been rigged. I wanted revenge, but there were other things to worry about. I had been thrown out from my home into a place which, oh, the irony, considered me an illegal alien. I'd surely be kicked out once again, this time into the actual Wasteland.

I was, once again, shaking with fear at the sight of leaving the last hint of civilization and being forced to survive in a wild environment, for which I was far from prepared. I felt weak and laid down on the floor, crying in silence. I felt like vomiting, but I had nothing left on the stomach to throw up, just some bile that came to my mouth and went back down again, so I laid my head on the floor and waited for somepony to come for me.

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“Oi! Get up and move here!” a rough voice yelled in the darkness.

Where? What? Oh, I had fallen asleep in the end, and I still was in that dull gray holding cell. There was one difference, though. The door of the cell was open and a pony in a police uniform was standing there, looking at me with total disgust, which sparked my anger. Ever since I had left the stable I had been looked upon as if I was a rat or a rotting body, and I wasn't going to take it anymore.

“What's wrong with you, you lazy zebra?” he groaned. “I told you to get a move on!”

With no little effort, I got back on my hooves and sloppily moved towards the guard pony. When I came closer, I noticed he couldn't be much older than me, up to the point that I could swear he was younger. His cutie mark was formed by two crossed, smoking guns, so I assumed that it made him a trigger-happy foal.

“First day at work?” I asked. Honestly, I felt so angry that I didn't care of the consequences. I just wanted to hurt somepony, and if it wasn't physically, at least I'd piss him off.

“Yes, how do you... argh, shut the fuck up and keep moving, scum!” he burst in anger, hitting me with his hoof on my side. I felt the pain propagate across my body, and I almost lost balance; but the pain acted as a relief, giving me strength to carry on.

The guard led me to a small room with nothing but a table and some cuffs on one side of it.

“Over there!” he spat, and cuffed my rear hooves.

“You can't possibly think I'm going to run away.” I grinned smugly. “If you do so, then you're even more foalish than I thought.”

I knew what was coming and got ready for it. The guard sent his hoof straight into my foreleg, making me lose my balance and kneel. My head also hit the table before me, and I felt the taste of blood in my mouth, then it went slipping down my throat. Even if I was close to enjoying being whacked, the little voice of logic in my head was warning me constantly. Learn your place, Farsight, for this is not the Stable anymore; and here a slip of the tongue could mean your death. As soon as you learn that, the better you'll do.

“Standoff, that's enough!” an older-sounding voice ordered. Standoff. Two guns. Who would have guessed?

“But chief, I...” Standoff sounded like a little colt being caught in the act of stealing candy on a shop. Even in pain, I smiled. That would teach him a lesson.

“If you want to beat ponies to a pulp, you can go travel the Wasteland as a Celestia-damned raider! The New Pegasus Police Department needs no thugs.”

“He was being disrespectful!” Standoff whined.

Oh, come on. You could have said “The bad pony in a jumpsuit started!” and you would have been more convincing.

“I. Don’t. Care!” the older voice replied, in a cutting tone. He was definitely not amused by the situation. Maybe there was a spot for actual kindness and respect in a place like this? I finally managed to get up on my hooves again and look beyond the table. I gazed at the Chief, the older pony that had ordered Standoff to stand down. He was a tough-looking big, dark green stallion with a greying mare, cut very short. When he noticed me, he looked me up and down, then stared at me with a stern face.

“What’s your name?” he asked. He irradiated respect and dread with every word. Looking at him, all my anger and my irony vanished, leaving place to a reverent fear.

“Farsight, sir,” I said and gulped down, again tasting blood.

“I’m Brass Badge, Captain of the NPPD. Pleased to meet you, Farsight. Coffee?” the captain asked. His tone had become softer, a bit paternal. If he hadn’t been so harsh before, maybe I could have trusted him.

“No, sir. I don’t think I could shove anything down my throat right now.”

“Fine, have it your way.” Badge let a faint smile appear on his face. “You know why you’re here, don’t you?”

“The bots spoke about Citizenship Cards or something like that.”

“Right on the spot. Let me explain what the fuss is all about.” Brass Badge cleared his throat and started walking up and down the interrogation room, just as if he were about to give a speech to a crowd. “New Pegasus has been a haven of civilization in the midst of the Equestrian Wasteland, a spire of light in the darkness; and like light attracts flies and vermin, New Pegasus started attracting all kinds of ponies from the wastes. Some of them were good, hard-working ponies who helped the city to thrive; yet others were clearly unwanted. Raiders, junkies, tribals, or worse. New Pegasus couldn’t risk to be swallowed by the tide of chaos coming from the Wasteland, so the City Board decided to limit citizenship to those ponies who really showed they could give their best for the welfare of the city. The rest, well, they have no place in here.”

“But why can’t I have a chance?” I begged.

“Ah, Farsight. I’m so sorry to have to say this to you, since I know exactly what you’re going through. I was a Stable pony myself too, got picked in that stupid Lottery years ago.”

I couldn’t believe it. Two in one night? Did the city feed on the ponies of the Stable or what?

“You too, sir?” I asked, amazed. “I’ve met two in the whole night.”

“Then you must have met Tracker, the librarian.”

“Yes.” I nodded. “She didn’t seem to enjoy watching her past before her.”

“That is true,” Brass Badge agreed. “Her banishment was, according to her words, unpleasant.”

“Mine was as well.” I lowered my head and felt the tears rising. “I... stood for what I believed in, and that got me kicked out.”

Brass Badge shook his head and grunted.

“You confronted your Overmare, did you?” His voice came out like pressured steam out of a pot, hissing with anger and resentment.

“I did.” I nodded sadly. “I thought I could bring some sense into the Stable and try to eliminate the Lottery once and for all.”

“You actually tried to do that?” Badge seemed surprised. A sincere smile broke his dreadful look, making him appear paternal. “Wow, that’s more than what I had expected. I tried to point out that the job assignment system wasn’t fair, since the hard jobs always went to the same population. Some weeks later, I got picked in the Lottery.”

Once again, my theory of a two-class Stable was being proven right. I shook my head in utter disgust when I heard his story.

“And you didn’t try to get revenge?” I asked.

“Of course I did.” Badge smiled again. “The first weeks or so. I counted the days for the Stable door to reopen, and then I’d fight my way back in.”

“Why didn’t you do so?” I felt intrigued by Badge’s story.

“Well, I got myself a nice job as a police pony. The pay was good, and the folks here at New Pegasus respected us Stable ponies, since we had education and tech and things like that. Then, well, I met a beautiful mare, we married and had foals; so I realized that I had found a new home. Besides, the City of New Pegasus watches the Stable closely the rest of the year, which means that at the slightest sign of trouble you’ll have an army pointing at you. In a word, if you want to take over the Stable, you have to rule the City.”

Rule the City? That was a massive challenge, much more than I could even imagine to achieve. The sensible thing to do was to try and do like Brass Badge did.

“Can you help me get a job, Chief?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, Farsight, but I’m afraid things aren’t that easy. If you had popped up a couple of months earlier, you would have been welcome to join the New Pegasus society, like all of us Stable folks. However, since the NER arrived at our gates and Full House opened his resort again, the City Board has decided to restrict new citizenships.”

Please, Celestia, send me to the moon; or anywhere but here, because once again, my luck had kicked me in the flank and sent me headfirst into the mud. I wanted to cry and slam my head into the table. Why me? Why the fuck did it have to be me? Why couldn’t I have been banished a year ago? However, I didn’t cry, probably because I was too scared of Badge to actually cry.

“The NER?” I asked, as I realized I needed all the information I could get to try to talk my way out of this one.

“The New Equestrian Republic. A big bunch of fancy pants Raiders, if you ask me.” Brass Badge seemed utterly displeased with them. “Can’t tell you much, apart from the fact that the radio keeps listing settlements that join under their banner. Still, I can’t bear them. All they have is guns, a hell of a lot of cannon fodder and no respect, even if they speak of law and order.”

Brass Badge stomped a couple of times in the floor, just to add some punch to his last statement. Indeed, there was no trace of doubt that he didn’t like those NER ponies at all, and he was starting to seem irritated, which brought back the fearsome pony I had first seen, so the best choice was to change subject.

“Raiders?”

“Bad bunch. Troublemakers, criminals, highwayponies, murderers, rapists, arsonists, everything you wouldn’t want to have close to you. We call ‘em all Raiders. It’s a commonplace name.”

“And Full House?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I don’t know either?” Brass Badge grinned, this time broadly. He was being sincere this time, no doubt. “Word in the street says he - or she - was a Pre-War businesspony, and that he - or she - owned half of old Las Pegasus. When the bombs fell, Full House vanished. We all thought he - or she - was done for, but now the Platinum Horseshoe has reopened, and it seems Full House has a fair share of power on the City Board, so we’re talking about a true VIP.”

“I see.” I hated to admit I had run out of conversation topics, which probably meant my stay in New Pegasus was going to end up pretty soon.

“Okay, now let’s get back on track. Since you don’t have a Citizenship Card, and you’re not going to get one in the next twenty minutes, I’m afraid you can’t stay within the walls of New Pegasus, which means I have no choice but to send you to Freedom Field.” His voice had become stern and cutting again, but this time I

was pretty sure he was hiding his disapproval with the new law.

“Freedom Field? What’s that?” I asked in fear. Was it some kind of prison? A concentration camp?

“It’s just the old North Las Pegasus. Now it’s an independent township, with its own laws. Not as civilized as New Pegasus, but anyone can live there. It’s either that or the Wasteland, pal, so it’s your choice.”

If he was trying to offer me some comfort, he failed. He totally failed.

“Freedom Field,” I muttered.

“Then Freedom Field it is,” he proclaimed. “Good luck, son, you’ll need it.”

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After being uncuffed and carried to the main entrance of the building by Brass Badge, a pair of security bots dragged me down New Pegasus, the same way I had been taken into the Police Department. I didn’t pay much attention to the folks around me, as I didn’t care if they were watching me, what they thought about me or the face they had. I only cared about where I was going.

An independent township with less civilized laws, that’s how Brass Badge had described Freedom Field. What could that possibly mean, anyway? Would that mean I’d have to fight for my food, kill or be killed? Oh, dearest Celestia, please have mercy upon me...

The closer we got to the northern wall of New Pegasus, the more obvious it was how “uncivilized” things were beyond the limits of the city. The shiny, flamboyant casinos were substituted by tasteless brick towers, with many of their windows broken or covered with planks. The fancy restaurants disappeared, only to be replaced by cheap “gummy-on-a-stick” carts or glowy apple vendors. There were no more classy hotels; instead, some gritty bed-and-breakfast joints advertised themselves...poorly.

The massive hulk of the city walls showed up before me. I had expected to see sturdy, straight concrete walls, but unlike what I had in mind, the walls were made of a conglomerate of sheet metal, old billboards, rubble, cinderblocks, chariots and all kind of sturdy, heavy garbage joined together with a generous layer of concrete. Above all that junk, a triple thread of barbed wire dissuaded anypony from trying the upward route. Hold on a minute...what about pegasi? Hadn’t they thought about the pegasi? Something was off here.

Close to the gates, I noticed a small building that stood out as clearly new and far more cared for than the ones around. It was a one-storey complex, built in grey bricks and copper coloured metal, and surrounded by a small perimetral wall. A flag post stood in the entrance gate, where a big flag was displayed: a red piece of cloth, with two crossed unicorn heads in black over a white circle. I assumed that it had to be the flag of the New Equestrian Republic. So these were the ones that Brass Badge hated that much. Still, I couldn’t tell why.

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**\*CLUNK! SCREEEEEEEE!\*** The gates of New Pegasus opened and I was pushed out of the city. Beyond the gates laid a massive checkpoint full of heavily armed security bots that patrolled all the way along the walls. Beyond laid a dark, grim avenue between buildings almost reduced to rubble. The light of the casinos was no more, only several bonfires along the streets pierced the darkness of the night, casting dreary shadows of the ponies that roamed the place. A stench of death and dirt filled the air, making my gut churn for the tenth time in the night. Totally overwhelmed by fear, I started walking, as the PipBuck beeped again, prompting the map. This was Freedom Field.

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Note: Reputation Change

Stable 188: Banished. You’re not allowed to enter this place again, and its inhabitants don’t want to see you.

City of New Pegasus: Not allowed. Unless you prove your worth (or bribe your way in), you won’t be able to enter.

## Chapter 2: Wild World

*“Hello again and good morning everypony, this is Mister New Pegasus speaking for all the keen ears out there. I got to see the sun today, from the top of the Platinum Horseshoe tower. It was glorious, those majestic beams of light coming out from the mountains in the East. You know, even if the word in the streets is that the Light Bringer reopened the clouds, I find it rather funny that we don’t get to see the sun that often in New Pegasus. Today, however, I’ve finally made it, and I feel like a new pony right now.*

*Let’s go with the news, shall we? The premiere opening of the Platinum Horseshoe was a total success, with all the ponies that are meant to be something in this glorious city walking the red carpet. This humble reporter was invited to the celebration as well, and I must confess, the casino looks as distinguished as we all pictured it to be. For a moment, I had the feeling that the bombs never fell. Actually, friends, the decorators have had the idea to hang a massive picture of Pre-War times on the lobby wall. Guess what it is! It’s a picture of Princess Celestia on the grand opening of the original Platinum Horseshoe casino. It almost made me shed a tear of joy.*

*On to other, less glamorous issues. As many predicted, the first ups and downs with the NER delegation have started to happen. Ambassador Merry Fields gave a public speech in front of the embassy building in which she stated that the NER’s purpose was to bring a law-abiding, modern government to all of the former Equestria, from Canterlot to Stalliongrad, from Manehattan to Maredrid.*

*And where does this leave New Pegasus, you might ask yourself. Indeed, the speech led many a pony to think that an entire army of the NER is advancing towards our beloved home and the Ambassador is just an agent meant to open the gates to the invader. Again, don’t rush to grab your guns, little ponies. Let’s wait to see what the Ambassador meant with those words. If you want this humble reporter’s honest opinion, I’m not against an NER-controlled Wasteland. I’ve heard many tales of slavery, rape and murder along the lands of Equestria; and I think that some law enforcement could turn the wastes into something a bit more...civil. Still, that’s good as long as they don’t intend to climb the walls and own the Strip.*

*And now, while we wait for things to unfold, how about some music? I’ve got something really classic here on my turntable. I leave you with one of the greatest recordings of the legendary Octavia. Remember, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I’m Mister New Pegasus, straight into your souls...”*

My stomach roared, as I hadn’t eaten anything in the whole day and I was starting to feel too weak. I had to find something to eat, even if that meant looking in a dumpster.

“Hey, you, newcomer!” A beige stallion with a blue and white mane caught my attention. He was wearing a dirty armor made of what looked like reinforced leather plates with small metal rivets. He meant danger, no doubt.

“What is it?”

“Y’know, Freedom Field is an unsafe place. Thugs all about the place, you could get robbed, or worse. That is, unless you hire me for protection.”

The first statement was true, as well as the second statement. The third statement, on the other hoof, was a blatant lie. He was as dangerous as the rest of the thugs, if not more.

“I’m sorry, but I have absolutely nothing to pay you with.”

“Ok, whatever. Don’t come whining back if you end up beaten in a side alley!”

I trotted past the thug, wanting to give an impression of security and confidence, although the truth was that I knew he was right, and that had me shaking. This wasn’t the Stable anymore, nor was it the seemingly orderly city of New Pegasus. This was the Wasteland in a nutshell; a place where death roamed around every corner. A soulless, bleak pit of corruption where a pony had no friends. A nightmare so twisted it made you want to blow your head off.

And the thing is, that perspective was tempting, since the hunger numbed my mind and made my legs feel shaky. I could just lie down and wait for death to come to me, or maybe I could piss one of the locals badly enough to get myself shot. It wouldn't be too hard, given the tough look of the ponies around.

New Pegasus was civilized, or it was wrapped in an appearance of civilization. The mares and stallions inside were clean and tidy, they dressed in fancy suits and dresses, their manes were carefully combed and cut. Out here, instead, the Wasteland was starting to reveal its true, horrid face. Ponies dressed in rags were lying on the alleys, sleeping or begging for some money, while thugs wearing menacing armors and big guns walked around cockily, probably showing off their firepower.

The buildings weren't shiny and glamorous anymore. In Freedom Field, the paint had fallen off the blocks, revealing the bricks underneath. Most of the windows were gaping mouths open to the cold night, unless they had been barred with wooden planks. Most of the street level shops had been already pillaged so many times that even the tiles on the floor had been ripped apart to be sold for a ridiculous price.

While New Pegasus gave an appearance of opulence and Old Equestria class, Freedom Field was a taste of the New Equestria, the rambling desolation that came as a consequence of the megaspells and the War. However, I immediately noticed that, even if dark, gloomy and ravaged; this place wasn't violent and chaotic. There was order behind every single fact. The thug in the door warning you of the dangers of Freedom Field. The drunkards sleeping on a side alley, far from the main path for traders and travellers; the poor beggars heating their hooves on a flaming barrel close to a corner; the thugs patrolling up and down the streets. Freedom Field was a macabre dance, but it was a clockwork mechanism.

An old mare with a toothless muzzle dressed in rags came stumbling to me. At first I felt disgusted, but then I realized, to my despair, that she and I weren't all that different after all.

"Please, son... Could you spare a cap to eat?" The poor lady begged.

"I'm so sorry. I don't have anything on me." I looked at her eyes. At first I had thought she might have been a drunkard or something, but her eyes were clean. She was desperate, fighting for her life. I felt a shiver of guilt down my spine, because she deserved to be helped, but I was hungry as well. In the Stable, I would probably have given her my ration and waited for another one for me. Out here, it was either her or me, so with sorrow grasping my soul like the talon of a griffin I gave her my coldest glare.

"But son... I need to eat something..." Her voice sounded frail, which made me feel even worse, but my reason told me to keep distant.

"I can't spare anything, ma'am."

I walked past her. I thought she might have attacked me or something, as desperate as she looked, but she just lowered her head and turned around. I felt like crying, but something inside told me not to. I had done the right thing.

I kept wandering around the street, looking for something to calm my hunger and end my weakness, but all my efforts were useless, since the dumpsters had already been searched through and the vendors wouldn't spare even the tiniest bit of food. Besides, I wasn't the only one looking for something to put in his mouth. I saw mothers beg for food, one of them even offering her body as a payment in exchange of something to eat. The very thought of it was disturbing, but I just stood there watching how a slimy buck handed a stick with a bunch of charred balls to the mare, who gave it to her foals. Then the vendor took the mare to a side street and fucked her violently, while the rest of the ponies around looked and cheered. I saw the tears of the mother roll down her cheeks as she was lying headfirst on the cold asphalt, the fat vendor ramming her from behind, and I just stood there, watching, even if in the very bottom of my heart I knew I should have done something. My head, however, was telling me that this was the world I had been sent to.

"Shouldn't we do something about this?" I asked, perplexed.

"What? She can't pay, so she offers sex for food. It's a trade after all, isn't it?"

Another mare, more sensitive than all of us, took the foals away from the brutal show. I felt bad about all this, however, the reply I had been given was rather logical. I was hungry as well, and I understood that if I

wanted food I'd have to offer something in return... And that mare... That mare had her body... She was a young, fine looking mare... What... what was going on? Oh, the hunger... My brain felt numb, as if my head was sunken in a dense fluid... My legs were starting to shake... Damn, I felt so weak... What... Was I fainting? Then, everything went black and I felt the cold road on my side.

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The first thing I felt was hunger. My stomach started to growl and tremble, letting me know I hadn't eaten since I had left the Stable. How long had it been already? One day; two, maybe? The next thing that I felt was pain. It wasn't the lacerating, burning pain of a gaping wound (damn papercuts) or a gash, it was more the remnant of a past pain, a muffled, pulsating feeling that travelled my entire body in waves. I could feel all my muscles stiffen as the wave of pain went through them, and relax when it was over. I focused my still numb mind in what my body was going through, trying to regain control of myself. Slowly, since my brain was still in a state of half-consciousness and everything felt as if I was sunken in a strange, viscous environment, I managed to stiffen the muscles of my left foreleg as the pulsating feeling went through it, and the pain became real. It wasn't muffled anymore, this time it felt like my foreleg had been skewered on a spear. I was awake.

A soft noise floated in the air, the sound of a conversation that was taking place at a distance, yet muted so that I couldn't listen who was talking and what they were saying. I came to realize that it wasn't a single conversation, but many of them happening at the same time and coming from different places. I remembered to have fainted in the middle of the street, but the floor beneath was soft and comfortable like a cushion; although it smelled bad, a mixture of pony sweat and other bodily fluids. Therefore, I had been moved, since I wasn't lying on asphalt anymore. Funnily enough, what would have made me want to throw up didn't stir me at all now. It seemed that I was getting used to this new, harsh environment.

I opened my eyes, not without some effort. I definitely knew I had been moved during the time I was unconscious, and I found out that I wasn't out in the open, but inside what looked like a small tent. The shelter was made of some kind of opaque, heavy-looking cloth material, which didn't allow sunlight to enter the tent, making it dark inside. However, a stream of light from the entrance of the structure cut the darkness and lit dimly the interior. I could see I was lying on an old mattress, covered by a sheet of coarse cotton. There was nothing in the tent besides me and a table in the darker side of it, and that was not all; as I could distinguish the silhouette of a pony standing in the darkness. Who was he and what was he doing in here with me? And also, where on Equestria was I now?

"Uhm...where...where am I?" I mumbled.

"Oh, crikey. Are you fully awake, mate?" asked the pony in the darkness, who definitely had to be a stallion, according to the depth of the voice. Yet, there were details that gave him a strange feeling. First, the voice sounded... jagged, grating; just as if stone was being scraped by another stone. Secondly, he had an odd accent, different from everything I had heard before, even in the Outside.

"Err, I think so." I shook my head trying to fight the dizziness I was feeling at the moment.

"Jolly good! When they found you on the street, we all thought you were done for, old chap." He sounded happy, no doubt. Was that happiness honest, though?

"What... what am I doing here?"

"You fainted in the middle of the street, mate. Almost drove the attention out of the free sex show in the side street." I couldn't see his face, but I was pretty sure my companion wasn't too proud about it. "I hate this about this place. You know, Freedom Field could be a lovely place if it wasn't for this riffraff."

So, I was still in Freedom Field. I now had to decide if that meant good or bad news, even if I had other matters in mind at the moment. The fact that the strange-speaking pony didn't move from his dark vantage point was starting to make me feel uncomfortable. I was still lying down on the mattress and thus, defenseless except for the telekinesis I could pull out, which wasn't too good either; which meant that I would have to speak my way out of this situation again if I wanted to obtain what I was looking for.

“I don’t want to be rude,” I said, trying to give my voice a soft and convincing tone, “but the fact that you keep yourself concealed is making me feel rather... odd. Would you please come out into the light?”

Silence, tense and uncomfortable silence. Obviously, he didn’t want to show himself, which made me trust him less second by second, although something did happen, because he moved. Up to that instant, he had been standing totally still, just as if he was a living statue, or shackled, or somehow tied to the floor, but now he had changed his position, even if it was just having lifted a hoof and placed it somewhere else.

“Not a problem, mate. Let me warn you, though. I’m not a pleasant sight for a newcomer, that’s why I keep myself in the dark.” He did sound worried.

Slowly, one hoof after another, the mysterious pony started moving from behind the table and into the light. I swear to Celestia herself that I had to force myself not to scream in fear and disgust when I saw the mockery of a pony that appeared in the stream of light. The moss green fur that coated him had almost fallen off, leaving a sickly green colored hide in sight, or even worse, the muscles beneath. The mane had been reduced to some loose strands falling feebly aside. Apparently, it had been wheat-golden... a long time ago. His eyes had turned opaque and vitreous, and his muzzle was full of gashes. It was horrid, indeed, yet I forced myself to keep looking.

“Now you see what I mean, don’t you?” he asked bitterly.

“I’m sorry, I-I-I have been rude. Wha-what is your name?” Well look at me now, stuttering like a foal. If I intended to look unstirred, I was giving right the opposite feeling.

“The name is Jolly Trotter, although everybody knows me as Mixer. There’s a jolly funny story behind the name, young lad. I bet you’d never imagine why the mates here called me Mixer. You give up? Oh, good, I’ll tell you. It’s because I used to be a bartender here in Las Pegasus before the War. Best cocktails in town, won the contest three times in a row. Even Princess Celestia had one or two one night. Oh, you should have heard her sing...”

“I’m Farsight, pleased to... before the WAR? But that was like two hundred and twenty years ago? How is that even possible?”

Mixer started laughing out loud. Was he mocking me? No, no, it didn’t sound like that... his laughter sounded honest, pure - for a rotting carcass, that is - and just out of good sport. However, I had been really serious in the question. Maybe my face was funny?

“Oh, you sure can be funny sometimes!” he chuckled. “You don’t know anything about ghouls, don’t you?”

“Ghouls?”

“Exactly, mate. Ghoul ponies. You know, the thing about and megaspells is that they don’t blow up and go away. They leave a nasty aftertaste called radiation.”

“I know about radiation, Mixer. I read about it on the Stable records.”

“I’m not saying you don’t, lad. Just for you to know, those Stable records are not better than my decaying skin. Anyway, as I was telling you, most of the vermin you’ll see if you travel the wastes is product of the radiation. It turns the beautiful into ugly, the cuddly into deadly; and in enough amounts, it turns a perfectly healthy stallion into this. Everyday I wake up to find a strand of my mare on the floor, or a chunk of hide, or a tooth, or even part of my hoof. I’m rotting as if I was dead, thing is, I live. Don’t look at me like that, it’s not painful, it’s just nasty, and in exchange, I’ve stopped aging, so to speak.”

“And that decay won’t make you lose your mind?”

“That’s a good question, old chap!” Mixer stomped a hoof on the floor to emphasize the answer. “It might happen someday. At some point sooner or later, all ghoul ponies go feral and turn into what we call feral ghouls. Yes, the name is obvious. However, if you come across any of those, shoot to kill! They won’t stand there and have a peaceful conversation like we two are having right now.”

Good advice indeed, I’d have to keep that in mind; although to be honest, I didn’t quite enjoy the perspective of having to kill somepony, zombie or not.

“Just out of curiosity,” I said, “you don’t sound like you’re a local. Where are you from?”

“You noticed the accent, didn’t you?” Mixer granted me an almost toothless grin, which I wish I could have unseen. “I come from old and proud Trottingham.”

“And I assume you were there when the bombs fell.”

“Close. I was returning from Trottingham when the balefire bomb hit the centre of Trottingham. Had I been in town, I would have been wiped out, but still, the wave of radiation swallowed me full. By the time I arrived at Las Pegasus, I was falling apart, so they didn’t let me in. I had to make my living here.”

I could feel a mix of emotions in Mixer’s voice as he was talking. A hint of sadness for his lost town, a bit of anger at the bigotry of the citizens of New Pegasus, but mostly pride for having rebuilt his life... or half-life.

“Speaking of here,” I continued, “where are we exactly?”

“Oh, sure. This is the Old Pioneer Fort of North Las Pegasus, or more correctly, Freedom Field. This was the first pony settlement in the Las Pegasus area. I believe this was bison territory long ago. Before the war, this was a historic landmark, mostly visited by tourists, but now it’s the main base of the Followers Of The Shy.”

“Followers Of The Shy? Are you some sort of cult?”

“So to speak, and ones are more than others. I myself don’t like all the messianic rhetorics of the Followers, but I agree with their purpose. We’re here to heal the wounded and aid the ones in pain, no matter their race or condition.”

“And what is your function here? You told me you were a bartender, I can’t see where it matches a healer.” I might have been too harsh again.

“Well, I was a bartender, but not any bartender. I was three times champion of the All Equestrian Cocktail Championship! And also, during the war, I worked for my bits in Zebra territory, learning all about their potion-brewing skills. After all, even the enemy needs its booze. And that’s why I’m here, mostly.”

“I... see.” Well that was unexpected.

“Now, mate, you should really get yourself something to eat.” Mixer nudged. “We ran checks on you and we saw that you had fainted because of the hunger and the physical effort.”

Still hungry and tired I got up on my hooves again, just to notice I was naked for the first time.

“Where’s my jumpsuit?” I asked, startled.

“Them wankers took it, the ones who dragged you here.” Mixer shook his head, disgusted. “I assume they grabbed it as a payment for the service. At least they didn’t rip the PipBuck off your leg. I can give you a lab coat, so that you don’t run around naked.”

“Thank goodness.” I sighed, and my stomach growled again. “Where can I find something to eat?”

“Just trot outside to the mess hall.”

“Thanks. Well, I guess I’ll have to leave.” I knew that I couldn’t stay there much more, since this was some kind of infirmary. Also, Mixer was starting to make me feel a bit uncomfortable again. As if he was forcing himself to be kind with me.

“Good luck on your trails, mate! Cheerio!” He waved, while I put the lab coat on and left the tent.

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The light blinded me as I came out of the tent. There was no sun, since the sky was covered in thick, black clouds, but the day was surprisingly bright. Come to think of it, this was the first time I saw the sky at daytime. Everything I knew about it came from recordings or pictures from the Stable terminals, but the reality was far more breathtaking than any document I could have come across in my entire life.

And if the sky was great, the building beneath was majestic as well. This was a fortress indeed. I stood in the patio of an ancient defensive construction. The walls, taller than many buildings in the city, were sturdily

made out of sandstone blocks. I was amazed at the thought of a bunch of pioneer ponies quarrying the stones and pulling them to this place, only to build a magnificent structure like the Fort. The design was simple, a square, thick wall with a main gate and towers on the corners, plus two extra towers at the gates.

Inside, the patio was occupied by a series of tents like the one I had been lodged in, each tent clearly marked with signs that read things like “Burn Ward”, “Traumatology”, “Magic Wounds”, “Lab” or “Supplies”. On the center of the patio, there was a big sturdy table, which was probably the mess hall for both the ill and the caretakers, so I headed towards it. Like the one in the Embassy building inside New Pegasus, there was a flag post close to the entrance gate. The flag was a simple yellow cloth with a motif in pink: a circle crossed by three intersecting lines, like an I and an X superposed. Whatever could that mean?

“Hey, you!” A voice caught my attention. I looked around to see a young, lively and rather pretty copper-coated unicorn mare wave a hoof at me. She was wearing a white lab coat with the same I-X emblem I had seen on the flag.

“Me?” I trotted towards the table while she got close to me.

“Yes, you. What was your name again?” she asked.

“Farsight.”

“Farsight, heh, funny name. I’m Golden Swallow, or Goldie if you prefer; nice to meet you. How are you feeling?” She smiled softly and moved her head to the side.

“Hungry right now, and rather weak.” I shrugged. “I’m new around here, and I spent the whole day wandering around without having eaten anything, so I guess I pretty much deserved it.”

“Don’t worry.” She smiled again, and whistled to a pony wearing a dirty apron. “Hey, Porridge! Can we offer something to the fine gentlecolt here?”

I smiled. I did like Golden Swallow, or Goldie; because she was vital and cheerful, always with a smile on her face, and she was making me feel comfortable. The pony called Porridge was an unicorn buck dressed with a dirty jumpsuit (not a Stable one) and a dirtier apron. I wouldn’t have eaten anything that he had served me unless I hadn’t noticed that the stains in the clothing were actually food stains. He filled a plate with a greasy looking soup and trotted back to the bonfire with the cauldron. I took a sip of the soup, and it felt as if life had been injected to my veins. I felt stronger as the warmth of the liquid travelled down my throat and across my body. The taste wasn’t superb, in fact, the soup tasted mushy and wet, and some of the contents of the plate didn’t look very good, but all things considered, at least it was tastier than the lousy underground vegetables we farmed in the Stable. And besides, I was too hungry to even complain about the taste.

“Are you enjoying your meal?” Goldie giggled.

“Pretty much, thank you!” I muttered between two sips of soup. “Hey Porridge!” I called out. “What’s the soup made of?”

The cook unicorn rose his head from the pot and gave me a curious look. I had the feeling that I had been the first in all of the Fort to ask for the composition of the soup, and who knows, maybe I was going to regret having asked.

“Nuh, it’s just th’ usual Radroach stew. Ah’ve been servin’ this very gruel for years.” He shook his head, letting me know that either he thought I was stupid or that he was bored as hell of cooking the same thing.

Radroach stew? That meant I was eating meat? But weren’t ponies supposed to be vegetarian? Wasn’t eating meat an abomination? What had the Wasteland turned us into? So many questions in my head for a single answer: shut up and eat! I wasn’t in a situation in which I could get picky about what I dragged to my mouth.

“You must be new here, asking about the stew and all. Where do you come from?” she asked with an expression of curiosity, her voice having turned momentarily stern.

That question sounded improper, fishy. This was no pointless chit-chat with a patient, since it was pretty clear to me that there was some sort of a patient-caretaker relationship between us. Besides, she had to have seen my PipBuck on my foreleg. There was no way missing it. Therefore, why was she asking?

“Yes, I am new around.” I answered cautiously. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, simple curiosity.” Goldie tried to hide a smile but she ended up giggling again. “No, dummy. I know you come from the Stable, I’ve seen your PipBuck. I just wanted to know if you trusted me.”

“And?”

“You don’t, which is good out here.” Goldie nodded. “However, you didn’t lie to me either, which, honestly, makes you a better pony than the lot out here.”

“That’s a relief.” I smiled. Goldie seemed rather honest and kind, quite a surprise. “So, what is this place exactly?”

“We’re the Followers of the Shy! We have devoted ourselves to following the path the great Fluttershy started before the War!” She waved a foreleg in the air, like trying to scare a bunch of parasprites. Of course, there were no parasprites.

“Fluttershy was the Mare of the Ministry of Peace, wasn’t she?” I was trying to remember what the records said about her.

“That is right, young Farsight.” She did a broad, theatrical nod and smiled. Of course, addressing me as ‘young’ was a bit of an irony. “She entrusted us with a glorious purpose.”

“And that purpose is?”

“Healing everypony, you dummy!” she giggled again. “She was our mentor, the one that gave our lives a meaning and broke us free from the tribal ignorance! Once we heard the preachings of the great Fluttershy, we left our caves and set paths to preach the word of the Shy, by fighting the good fight!”

Messianic rhetorics, as Mixer had told me, filled Goldie’s speech every now and then. She sounded like a preacher talking about a miraculous Goddess, with all those references to “glorious purposes” and “preaching the word”. Maybe all the wrapping was a bit preposterous, but the candy inside tasted good. Their goal, that is, to heal everypony regardless of their condition, was really noble.

“And how did you come to do this?” I asked with honest curiosity.

“Well, many years ago, when the world was in the Darkness that the megaspells brought, our ancestors lived in caves and struggled to survive, fighting over almost everything, and causing no more than death and sorrow. One day, a young filly stumbled into an old, abandoned building, where she found our Word, a collection of recordings of the great Fluttershy. After having heard her wise preachings, we understood that we had been wrong all the time, and that our heavenly mission was to bring forth Fluttershy’s wisdom and kindness to the world. Therefore, we left our caves and started wandering the roads. Many of us died, many of us left, but the most of us stood strong, so we decided to carry a banner that made us visible to the world, so that is how we came up with this flag! It’s a butterfly, don’t you see? Just like Fluttershy’s Cutie Mark!” Goldie pointed at the pole close to the door.

“Well, that’s one hell of a story.” I took the last sip of my plate.

“It is, indeed.” She smiled. “My grandparents led the expedition that arrived here. Since there was nopony living here, we decided to establish ourselves in the Fort. Even if we’re pacifists, there have been many ponies that haven’t liked us meddling around. Luckily for us, Freedom Field took us in without much violence. We have been attacked by the gangs along the years, but they finally ended up understanding that we were more an aid than a nuisance.”

“That is good to hear.” I nodded. “How do you finance all this setup, though?”

“Why, why. What were you, an accountant or something?” Goldie gave me a big, smug grin. “You’re the first pony ever to ask this.”

“I happen to have worked as an accountant for some years, yes. Funny how the world goes, isn’t it?” I smiled back, irony in my face. “No, honestly, I’m interested. You’ve got quite a professional facility here, so I guess you don’t gather this out of the dust.”

“That’s true, we don’t. To be honest, we have our ways of funding ourselves, apart from charity, which works surprisingly well. However, I can’t tell them to you. Professional secret.”

She tried to smile softly as she had done before, but I could spot a hint of discomfort in her expression. Something in her body language had changed when I asked her about the money. However, she had been honest in her reply, and she had her right to keep secrets from me.

“Mind if I ask you some more questions?”

“Ask away!” She nodded. Her body language had returned to normal again. “There might be some things I won’t be able to answer, mostly because I don’t know.”

“Can you tell me a bit about Freedom Field?”

“Oh, yes, Freedom Field. What a misleading name for a town, since it’s not free nor a field. Still, it’s not as bad as the wastes, not at all! After all, there are no wild beasts in here, the gangs keep them at bay!”

“Well, that’s a relief.” I whistled.

“It is, it is.” She nodded twice. “Unlike New Pegasus, where the doors are heavily guarded and only a small hoofful of ponies can walk in and out, Freedom Field is unguarded, which means that anypony from the Wasteland can enter. If there was nothing more to it, this place would be no different from the rest of the world, with death roaming every corner. What has helped us keep some order is the existence of organized gangs in town. It’s true that every now and then they fight against each other and the rest of Freedom Field suffers, but we’ve been living in a ceasefire for the last years.”

She had a point. After all, the gangs cared for their investments and their dominions. Therefore, in case of an attack from the outside, they would be the first ones to stand up and defend their interests, turning Freedom Field into a rather safe place in the Wasteland.

“And what about the town itself?” I asked. “Any remarkable landmarks or something?”

“Remarkable landmarks?” Goldie chuckled. “What do you think this is, Manehattan or something?” She giggled again and smiled. “Now being serious, there’s not much to see around here, that’s the way it is. Apart from us, there are only some habitable buildings. The rest are all torn apart or abandoned, like they have been for almost two hundred years.”

“And no pony has explored them?”

“Nope.” She shrugged. “Can’t really tell you why, I just suppose that the caps the gangs pay are more attractive than scavenging around for possibly no loot.”

“Caps?” I felt surprised. “Like, bottlecaps?”

“Just like that. Oh, of course, you come from a Stable. The currency nowadays is bottlecaps, that’s why you should always carry a hoofful on you.”

“Well, thanks for letting me know. I wouldn’t have kept a bottlecap otherwise.”

“No problem. Where were we?” Goldie looked up, thinking. “Oh yes, landmarks. First, we’re here, in the Old Pegasus Fort, but I suppose that’s not what’s interesting for you. Then we have Trader Plaza. The name is a bit overdone for what it is really. Trader Plaza is nothing more than the ruins of an old building, a square of brick around a concrete floor. The caravaners and local traders chose the place because of the shape of it, since it’s the only actual square in Freedom Field, so it kind of resembles an ancient marketplace. It’s got its share of charm, if you ask me. If you need basic supplies or food it’s the place to go.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Yeah. Then there’s the Four Little Diamonds Casino, or the Diamonds for short. It’s a small gambling den in one of the side streets out there. They also serve food at a reasonable price. I eat there every now and then. It’s run by a good friend of mine, Saddle Buckmare. You could say he’s one of the top ponies of Freedom Field, since he runs a casino.”

“In that case, I assume he is a gang leader as well.” I gave Goldie a questioning look.

“Quick thinker, huh?” She smiled back. “Yes, he leads his own gang. A casino is a risky business out here, so you need to have somepony backing you up, don’t you? Thankfully, Saddle is a good fellow and keeps his gang small, just to protect the Casino and the money.”

That sounded like a pre-made praise of that Buckmare fellow. How could a sworn pacifist like Goldie have a good image of a mobster who protected a casino with a bunch of armed goons? According to the simplest logic, Goldie should despise any kind of violence; but she didn’t, so something was off here, either her pacifism or my logic. That was something I would have to investigate.

“Then, right face to face with the Diamonds, there is the Tesla Bar. Calling it a bar, though, is some sort of a lie. Everypony in Freedom Field knows it’s a weapon store, and almost everypony knows that what they sell is just above the level of rubbish. However, since they sell shiny-glowy energy weapons, every now and then they have a sale or two. Of course, every single pony that buys something there doesn’t return.”

“Would it be too far fetched to think it is run by another gang?” I was starting to get the hang of things here. It seemed that the gangs had made a tacit separation of the businesses, leaving room for each other to profit from their sales without stepping into each other’s areas of influence. It was a clever strategy, but it couldn’t last forever. Someday, somepony would want to climb the ladder.

“Don’t get cocky, Farsight, of course it’s run by another gang.” She smiled and winked. “They call themselves the Coilites, and trust me, you won’t hear much of them, as they tend to keep their space. As long as they can trade, they don’t bark too much, and honestly, I believe they are more bark than bite. If the guns they have are as reliable as the ones they sell, I don’t think they’ll be able to fight anypony.”

“Don’t you think they’ll keep the best for themselves?” Obvious question or not, I had to ask it.

“That’s the reasonable thing to think, but who knows?” Goldie shrugged.

“Yeah, who knows.” I smiled. “Is that all?”

“No. Not at all.” Goldie scowled and winced. “There is a Music School down the main Avenue, close to the New Pegasus Gate.”

“A Music School?” That was a surprise, as I would never have expected something like that in a place like Freedom Field. “They teach music here?”

“Yes, they do, but it’s just a hideout for another gang.” Goldie spoke with unhidden disgust.

“Is it? Well, you don’t seem to like them all that much.”

“Of course I don’t. Those Stringer bastards are flooding the city with their goons, up to the point that almost one of every three ponies in town is affiliated to their gang. They speak of peace, but every single day we see more of them lurking around with their guns in plain sight. I don’t think they want to keep peace. They want to impose their peace, which will prompt us into war sooner or later. I just can’t stand them! And their leader, that Dee Cleff, strutting around like the Queen of Queens, just as if she owned the place!” Goldie was starting to shiver in anger, so I thought it would be best to change subject.

“Okay, enough questioning.” I smiled and put a hoof on her to calm her down. She looked at me with a cold glare but ended up relaxing and smiling. “Just one thing. I’ll be staying in Freedom Field for a while, so... is there a chance that you can give me a job?”

“Are you a healer of some kind? Herborist? Brewer? Magic healer? Soother?”

“Err, no. I’m afraid not. I’m good with numbers, though, and reasonably capable with computers.” I knew where this was going. I was going to be thrown to the streets, broke and almost naked. I felt anguish clutch my soul once again.

“Then, I’m afraid I can’t give you a job. We already have a technician and an accountant.” I guess she immediately saw my worried face, because she kept speaking. “However, I have a proposal to make to you. You can’t be a proper Follower, since you haven’t learnt and sworn our creed, but you can help us out from the outside by working as a scavenger and a trader. There are many unexplored buildings in town, and I’m pretty sure they’ll be hiding interesting things. Any chemicals and pre-War medicine you find, bring them to

me and I'll pay you handsomely. The rest you find is yours to deal with, and I'll speak with the ponies at Trader Plaza to give you a spot there. If you make money, you take care of yourself. If you end up broke, the Followers will feed you. About a place to spend the night, you're on your own. What do you say? Does this sound interesting to you?"

It was, indeed, an interesting deal. At least, I had food assured for the days where the going got tough, and for the rest, well, I'd have to learn as I went. In any case, survival was starting to be safer in those conditions.

"You've got yourself a deal, Goldie." I smiled and I had to refrain from hugging her. "Thank you very much, I owe you my life right now."

"You're welcome, honey." Goldie smiled back, as sweetly as she could. "You owe me nothing, I'm just doing what Fluttershy would have done. Now, go out there and earn yourself some caps! Open UP!" she screamed to the ponies in the gates.

The wooden gates opened with a deep tremor and left me the way open to return into Freedom Field. Goldie stood beside me and placed a hoof over my back.

"Goodbye, Farsight, and remember, if you need medical attention, we'll be right here! The fort won't grow hooves, you know!" she said.

"Bye, Goldie." I freed myself gently from her hoof and started walking outside.

For the third time, a door slammed shut behind me, but this time, the world before me looked promising.

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Scavenging proved itself to be a tough job, but the reward sounded so worthwhile! The first house turned out to be a real challenge, since many of the doors were locked and, to be honest, my lock picking abilities were close to null. The only two bobby pins I carried on me broke while I was trying to open the door to the first flat in the three-storey building I had chosen as my first prey. Stopped dead on my tracks, I started to think on a way to breach the doors, since many of them were closed. Sure, I could try to buck them open, but many of the doors seemed sturdy enough to hold on.

I started to stroll up and down the hallway thinking on a way to break the doors open when I found myself standing before a maintenance closet. The door was frail and cracked, moisture having filtered almost to the very core of it, so there was a reasonable chance that my untrained hindlegs could force it to open. I breathed deep and thrust my body into a spin, trying to use inertia more than muscular power to generate strength. My hooves hit the door and bounced, making me lose balance, as I was in a circular motion. I landed headfirst on the tiled floor, feeling more embarrassment than actual pain. Thank Luna nopony was around to see me.

However, the attempt was successful. The door had broken in half, leaving a way open into the locker. As the light of the PipBuck swept away the darkness in the closet, I found myself in a small room full with tools of all kinds, from brooms to heavy hammers. I found a rather well conserved tool belt that went straight to my hip, and a small hatchet that could serve me for self-defense. Not that I planned to hack anypony open, but since almost everypony was armed in this city, I assumed it would be wise to carry something around to defend myself.

Still, there was nothing good to open a door in there. No, wait a minute...

"Gotcha, baby!" I squeed. I had just found an electric drill that seemed to be fairly well conserved. With a bit of luck that would be enough to bust the locks open, provided the plugs in the hallway had power on them. The lighting of the hall was on, so it was reasonable to think so. With a silent prayer to the two Goddesses, I plugged the drill to the socket, and turned the drill on.

*WHIRRRRRRR!!*

"Yay!" I jumped in glee, almost punching a hole in my hoof with the spinning drill. I felt the rush when the tip of the tool buried itself on the wooden door, making its way through layers of conglomerate and brass, thinking about the things that could await me in the flat I was breaking into. Again, a thought came to my

mind. Wasn't I actually acting like a common burglar? What was the difference between me and one of those ponies I had been told to despise?

The drill stopped dead and I took it off its place in the door, leaving it gently on the floor. I sat on my flanks as I thought about what I was doing. It was true that I was taking somepony else's things, so technically I was stealing, but on the other hoof, this building didn't seem to be inhabited. It looked like the ponies that once lived here had left in a hurry looking for a safe place, never to return again. So, looking at it from that viewpoint, I was just claiming forgotten goods. I felt puzzled, and a bit guilty. All this world was so confusing! In the Stable, the concepts of 'good' and 'evil' were clearly outlined, and those acts that fell off limits were thoughtfully discussed by the Dwellers. Out here, good and evil were diffuse mists, often overlapping into a moral fog, and this was one of those situations.

As I had always done in doubt, I resorted to my coldest logic, devoid of any feelings, to analyze the situation. Thinking practically, the benefits of entering the houses and scavenging were clear: I could obtain loot that would exchange for caps in the Trader Plaza, allowing me to buy things that I could need, such as food and proper clothing. I had already noticed how mares (and some bucks) looked at my uncovered flanks while I walked down the streets. On the other hand, the trouble that I could be involved in for stealing things was little and limited, maybe a quarrel or two with the owner of the loot, if and only if that owner existed. Therefore, the situation reduced itself to a dilemma of choosing between me and an unknown pony that might as well be dead, so there was few to think about. I had to make a living, whereas a dead pony needs no caps; so I powered the drill back on and finished breaking the lock open.

The flat inside was small and crammed. A small living room with an adjoint kitchen, two bedrooms and a small bathroom composed the place. Most of the furniture was still in place, a small couch and a low table standing before a television in the living room, beds and wardrobes in the rooms, a first aid kit in the bathroom and the usual kitchen furniture, with the refrigerator humming gently on one side. I trotted towards the TV and turned it on, just out of pure curiosity. I hadn't seen an actual television in my whole life, but I had read about the wonders of that technology in the Stable, so I wanted to know what it was like.

The loudspeaker buzzed as the TV got powered on, and the screen showed a black and white mist of static. I started operating the knobs, looking for something to see, until a fixed image came to the screen. It was a vague composition of circles and squares, with the words "PLEASE STAND BY" printed in the middle of the screen. An age-old voice came booming from the speaker:

*"To all the watchers, please keep calm. The country has sustained a massive aggression by our neighboring Zebra Nation, but we want to reassure that the situation is under control. However, in order to make things easier, we would like to encourage all the population to head to their shelters and stay there until the alert is over. We repeat, head to your shelters until the alert is over. And remember, please keep calm. This has been a message broadcast by the Ministry of Morale.*

*This is the Ministry of Morale sending an emergency message. To all the watchers, please keep calm..."*

The message went on and on, endlessly repeating the distress signal. Obviously, the alert hadn't been called off, it had been wiped clean. I felt sad watching the message over and over again, reminding me of a grim past of our world; a past of which we all were paying the consequences. I turned the TV off again, since I didn't want to think about it anymore. Clearly, the device was useless nowadays, but maybe I could sell it for scrap metal and electronic components. However, I would have to drag it up and down town. The TV would have to come last.

I kept searching the flat for loot. I happened to find an old pre-War suit in a rather good condition, even if it was full of dust and it smelled like hell, and I tried it on me. If it suited me, I would dump the lab coat, a thing I was more than willing to do, since the cold winter air was starting to freeze my hindlegs. The pants were a bit too wide and the jacket was old and ugly, but otherwise it was a good fit, so the labcoat went to a big bag I had found in the same closet as the suit. I also scavenged a couple of fine dresses.

Then I moved on to the bathroom. The first aid kit had nothing much apart from a couple of rolls of magical bandages and a blister of Mintals. They all went to the bag, and I would sell them to Goldie as soon as I left the building. I could hear the caps rustling in my pockets already, and a greedy smile popped in my face. The

kitchen didn't have much loot, just some mushy pre-War food stored in the cupboards. It would make a meager sale, but if I couldn't sell them at least I would have something to eat.

Last but not least, I entered the other bedroom, obviously the one of a filly. A big poster of the Wonderbolts was stuck to the wall, the colors almost faded. However, the image made me smile. Being a colt myself I watched the Wonderbolts' adventures over and over again, dreaming about travelling the world myself and living in danger; then I realized that I was no pegasus and that, therefore, I couldn't fly, so there would be no adventure for me. That's when I switched to Mare Do-Well. All those memories coming back to my mind made me smile again, this time with a hint of sadness in my heart. Those were better times, no doubt.

I searched over the closets of the bedroom looking for interesting stuff to loot. Much of it was junk, dusty and useless, but I could salvage some clothing, some children books and a funny little gadget called "RoboDoggy Winona". It was a small robot in the shape of a puppy, painted in brown and white, with two bulbs as eyes and fully jointed. It ran on a magic-powered battery that was, of course, empty. The little toy looked adorable, but it also seemed to be a very complex piece of engineering. I used a bit of my magic to reload the battery up to the point that the contraption could be powered on again. I operated the small button and the toy came alive, acting like what I assumed a real dog acted.

The robot looked at me with its eyes, now lit by the energy flowing out of the battery, then he came close to my legs and started sniffing them. Well, at least the toy dog was moving its head and the speaker inside it made a pre-recorded sniffing sound. Then he leapt back and barked twice, its metallic tail swinging gleefully. The little thing was sweet, and I was pretty sure it would sell well out there. Hell, that was the kind of present I would have loved to get as a colt! The dog, or RoboDoggy Winona, had sat beside me and looked up at me, silently. I turned it off, with a chilly feeling travelling down my spine. For a minute I had forgotten it wasn't an actual dog.

I left the flat with my bags full of all kinds of stuff, even the heavy TV that stood on the living room. I had to use all my telekinetic abilities to be able to walk, as overencumbered as I was. I also hid the electric drill in the maintenance closet, just to be sure I could return to investigate more flats. It was funny, though, that no pony had tried to scavenge here before. There was quite a lot of things to loot around the place, and many of them were in quite a useful state. I thought of the moral concerns I had been through when I started breaking into the flat I had pillaged. Maybe the people in this town could have some sort of respect for the prior inhabitants. That, however, sounded far fetched. The reason Goldie had given me sounded much more plausible to me, even if I hadn't lived for too long in Freedom Field. Most probably, the pay for a gang goon or for a caravan guard would be better than what I could hope to gather from selling scavenged goods; besides, the pay would be fixed and guaranteed in those cases, unlike in mine, in which I depended on my luck and bartering skills to earn my caps. Still, as long as it meant there was more for me to find, I wouldn't even bother.

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Trader Plaza was pretty much like Goldie had described it to me, or like the mental picture I had made about it when Goldie was talking to me about it. In essence, it was nothing more than the remains of what was meant to become a significant building in old North Las Pegasus. Now, it was nothing more than a flank-tall orange brick wall forming a square perimeter in the street. Inside, over the concrete floor of what had been the building's ground level, a whole web of wooden constructs had been established. Small stands made of plywood and scrap metal formed actual streets inside the makeshift square. Each stand had been profusely decorated with cloth or plastic sheets, scribbled with the names of the stands, such as "Feather Duster's Home Appliances", "Sunny Orchard's Vegetable Emporium" or "The Breaks: Small Dishes for Great Appetites". That last one had to be some sort of restaurant thingy.

I wandered around looking for the empty stand that Goldie had promised me. I had to deliver some supplies to her at the fort, but before I wanted to unpack everything that I had collected today and try my luck selling my loot. I noticed an old access to the foundation levels of the unfinished building, but it had been covered with a quite sturdy brick wall. I found it surprising, as it came to my mind that the basement access in the building I had scavenged had been barred as well, in this case with an old bed frame and some planks. The people here feared something that lied beneath their hooves, no doubt, but the ponyholes in Freedom Field

hadn't been locked.

"Hey, you!" A feminine voice called me from the side. "You're Goldie's new buck, aren't you?"

I looked to see a young and sturdy grass-colored mare with a red mane smile at me from behind the counter of her stand, which was covered in a tartan cloth. The stand was full of turnips and fat, spiky green plants. I looked up to see that I was standing right before Sunny Orchard's Vegetable Emporium. She was wearing a rough barding meant for dirty works, such as farming.

"Yes, I'm Farsight, nice to meet you." I greeted. "Sorry, but I can't lift a hoof or I'll fall to the side. You're Sunny Orchard?"

"No, no, I'm her daughter, Sunberry Grass." She smiled gently. "Don't worry, many ponies ask me the same question. Mom runs the business from the farm we have in the outskirts of town. I just come and go, and sell the crop in here. We used to rely on the caravaners, but in the end we thought we would make it better by ourselves."

"I see." I nodded, then pointed at the sign. "But isn't Vegetable Emporium a bit pretentious?"

"Oh, yes, it sure is!" Sunberry laughed out loud. "I told my mother like a thousand times that the name was ridiculous, but she insisted, and since she runs the joint, well, what she says becomes law."

"I know that feel." I nodded, smiling. Inside, however, it reminded me of the Stable and the way things were done in there, what made me clench my teeth.

"Well, it's not like it's a drama or anything like that!" she waved a hoof and closed her eyes. "Let's just carry on. Your stand is the one beside mine, so I hope you won't be selling vegetables!"

"I won't," I said, as I unpacked my bag onto the stand and got behind the counter, "at least not like that. I'll be selling what I can scavenge from the abandoned buildings, so I might sell some food among other stuff."

"Interesting..." She raised a hoof to her muzzle, letting me know she was eagerly waiting for me to unpack the bag. "Oh, but that is lovely!"

She had seen the dress I had found in the flat, and was clearly daydreaming about it, as her eyes almost shone with delight as she looked at the dress that now hung conveniently from a cord that had been installed on top of the stand.

"Do you like it?" I asked her, although I already could guess the answer.

"It's lovely! Where did you find it?"

"In an abandoned flat in one of those buildings out there. I didn't even leave town."

"It's amazing!" she squeed. "I'd pay some good caps for it, if I had them..."

"How much does a turnip of those cost?" I asked.

"Why do you ask?" She seemed surprised by the sudden change in the subject.

"Just tell me, please."

"Five caps, but I don't know why you ask." Sunberry's face showed her total puzzling.

"Five caps for something that will last a day, three at most. For a dress that can last for years, I should ask for thousands of caps, shouldn't I?"

"You won't sell a single thing if you charge so much, you know?"

I smiled gently as I saw Sunberry's face change from a gleeful smile into an ironic smirk.

"I know, I know." I chuckled. "I was just doing a reasoning to see how you reacted. Since all these things are actual antiques, their value is hard to calculate. Therefore, I suppose I'll have to gamble a bit with prices and look for similar stuff along the market."

"Yes, that will be the wisest thing to do." Sunberry nodded.

“Would you watch my stand while I’m gone?” I asked. “If I miss something, like for example a dress, when I come back, I will know who’s to blame...” I smiled while saying this, letting her know it was ironic.

“OK, OK!” She laughed at my veiled menace. “I’ll keep an eye on your things.”

I smiled back and left to look for reference prices. As I walked down the alleys between stands, I looked closely at every single item on display, asking for the prices of those that weren’t on sight. Since I was new in the market, the vendors took me as a curious customer and tried to give me the lowest price. By doing this, I learned that the food could be charged between three and twenty caps, depending on size and conservation. Clothing spanned between the fifty caps of a simple gown to the 500 of a classy tuxedo. Electronic appliances went on from 100 to 2000 caps, and functional electronic components were on high demand.

What I did notice, though, was that some things weren’t sold in Trader Plaza. There were no weapon salesponies, no ammo dealers, no gun repairponies; even if everypony around carried a holstered gun or a rifle close to them. Therefore, there had to be an arms market somewhere in town. I already knew from Goldie that the Coilite Gang controlled the energy weapons dealership in Freedom Field, but that left a big void regarding standard, gunpowder weapons.

Another thing that wasn’t on display in Trader Plaza were chemicals or medical supplies. This time, however, I had a hunch about who was the one in control of that market. I would bet my meager earnings of today to the fact that Goldie and her Followers of the Shy were the ones monopolizing the chems market in Freedom Field.

With a list of possible prices in my mind, I returned to my stand to see that there were already some potential customers snooping around, while Sunberry tried her best to keep them entertained. Some of the ponies on the line seemed wealthy, or at least well dressed; whereas others dressed in rags and inspired pity on the beholder. My neighbour in the market, however, treated them all equally, chatting calmly and telling jokes and anecdotes every now and then.

“...And that’s how I got my Cutie Mark!” she was saying as I arrived at my stand. “Hey, Farsight! Took you long enough! You’ve got customers here!”

I nodded and thanked Sunberry for her help, then I crawled behind the stand and started taking care of business. The first customer was an elderly mare, well dressed and stern, that was looking for something that matched with her blue dress. I went through the contents of my stand and found myself looking at the lab coat. It was made out of a coarse, white cloth, but it seemed to be a fairly good garment for a rainy day.

“I’ve got this coat here.” I lifted the lab coat and put it on the counter. “It’s well conserved, water resistant and very comfortable. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about.”

“But it’s a lab coat, son.” The mare wasn’t convinced.

“I know, ma’am. However,” I said with my most charming face, “some small tweaks here and there and it will become a lovely white overcoat that will definitely match your dress and your fur. Since I know it needs some work, I’ll leave it cheap. 55 caps.”

The mare looked at the coat, then to her purse, then back at the coat. She mumbled something and finally nodded. The caps rustled as the mare shoved them towards me. I packed the coat into a tight packet and smiled at her as I gave her the garment. With a nod, the elderly mare turned around and left.

“You’re a fancy talker, y’know?” Sunberry whispered. “I’d never believe you would sell that lab coat. Not like that.”

I smiled at her and headed to the next customer, who was a total opposite to the mare that had bought me the lab coat. He was a rather young buck dressed in dirty rags two sizes too big, as he was very thin. His mane was rustled and disordered, badly cut and dirty with mud and what looked like urine. His eyes were bloated and red, as if he hadn’t slept in days, and was twitching nervously as his eyes quickly shifted from one point to another, while he mumbled an unintelligible mantra. Something was very wrong with him.

“Morning, sir.” I greeted him keeping my distance. “What can I help you with?”

“Uh. Erm. Hm. I. I-I-I...” he kept stuttering nervously while emitting guttural noises. “Food. Need food.”

“Food? Why, we have a broad choice. What is it that you would like to purchase?”

“I-I... I ne-ne-need food. Food! Hungry!” His speech was nothing more than a mindless blabber.

“Yes, sir, I know. Just tell me what you want and we’ll discuss prices.” I was starting to get nervous. The pony before me acted irrationally and there was an aura of aggressiveness around him, as if he could pounce on me any minute. My mind concentrated on the hatchet on my belt, but I didn’t want to get violent on my first day, since I might get kicked out of the Trader Plaza.

“FOOD!” he yelled. “GIVE ME FOOD, DAMMIT!”

That was enough aggressiveness for me, so I placed a box of mac and cheese on the counter, and the pony grabbed it furiously. Then he searched through her pockets and hurled a bunch of caps onto the stand. Right after that, he left on a hasty gallop. I picked the caps up. Seven, not a bad sell for being such an awkward one. Beneath the caps I noticed a small piece of cardboard, the shape of a playing card. It was yellow and carried a familiar pink I-X emblem. What had this pony to do with the Followers of the Shy?

“You OK?” Sunberry asked. “I thought you were going to get into some trouble.”

“Yes, I’m fine.” I noticed that my heart was thumping furiously in my chest. Indeed, it had been a tight one. “What was wrong with him?”

“That pony is a junkie. He was totally high on Dash.”

“Dash?” It was the first time I heard that name. “What is Dash?”

“It’s some sort of drug, a recipe from the War. Makes you faster, stronger, braver.” Sunberry shook her head in disgust. “The downside is that it turns you into a total addict, and Freedom Field is swarming with those. It’s a disgrace.”

“Who sells those drugs?” I asked. I understood Sunberry’s disgust. A drug that could turn a young, healthy buck into the hopeless debris I had dealt with was a total disgrace.

“I don’t know.” Sunberry winced in anger. “I don’t live here most of the time, I come to town every now and then, so I’m not much into the nightlife; but my guess is that one of the gangs must be the one behind it.”

“I suppose so.” I shrugged as well, and kept taking care of the customers.

“Listen, Farsight. You’re new around and you don’t know the hard truth of the trader these days. We’re being constantly harassed by junkies. It wasn’t like this some months ago, but now it has become a very unpleasant routine. I don’t know who’s selling the drugs, but what I know is that all the traders are constantly asking for a solution.”

“Speaking of which... does this ring a bell?” I popped out the card with the Follower emblem.

“Isn’t that the symbol of the Followers of the Shy?”

“Yes. The junkie dropped it.”

“Well, that is suspicious. I have never seen such cards.”

“Could it be some sort of foul play?”

“Maybe. Are you going to investigate it?”

“Maybe. I feel curious about what the implication of the Followers is.”

“Farsight... why would you put yourself in danger because of this?”

“I don’t know. I just feel curious about it. Besides, I’ve been a victim of some plots before, and I don’t like the feeling of being played.”

“Just be careful, okay? We don’t need dead heroes.”

I nodded in silence. Apart from that incident, the day had been good altogether, since I had sold almost every

single thing I had found, except for the dress Sunberry had liked and the RoboDoggy Winona. My pouch was now rustling with caps, and I felt really satisfied. After all the pains I had been through, I was starting to feel like I could make a living out here. I had left the stand for a while to deliver the medical supplies to Goldie at the Fort, which made me earn myself a juicy reward. I could have asked her about the card the junkie had forgotten at my stand, but something told me that was certainly unwise. Instead, I just walked away with many questions in my mind.

The day was nearing to an end when something stirred up the market. The vendors in the stands started mumbling nervously. Something was happening in Trader Plaza, something that had shaken almost everypony in the area. I was feeling rather puzzled, since I didn't understand what was going on, so I asked Sunberry about it.

"I don't know," she answered. "It seems that Dee Cleff is visiting the Plaza."

"Dee Cleff? The Dee Cleff of the Music School?" I asked, surprised.

"How many other Dee Cleffs do you know?" was Sunberry's reply.

Well, just one, who according to Goldie was a tyrant that was trying to take over Freedom Field by crushing everypony under her hooves. However, the atmosphere in the market wasn't one of fear. Instead, it felt as if the vendors were waiting for a superstar to walk by, as if the legendary Sweetie Belle had entered the building. The ponies in the stands were nervous, but they appeared eager to talk with the mentioned Dee Cleff.

"Oh, here she comes!" somepony said.

A group of ponies was coming down the alley, looking at the stands at the sides. The retinue was composed of two ponies in black leather armor clearing the way, two mares in the middle and other two armored ponies guarding the back. Indeed, it looked as if the very Celestia was coming to visit. The armor of the ponies had a symbol painted on them, a turquoise bass clef. In a shocking contrast to the guards, the two mares in the middle dressed classily. One of them, who had to be Dee Cleff, was wearing a sharp white linen suit, a white shirt, a thin black tie and a comfortable looking beige coat. On her head, she wore a white stetson with a black band. The mare beside her, who appeared to be a counselor, wore a simple checkered dress.

The group got closer to our stands, and Sunberry almost squeed when Dee Cleff stopped to take a look at them. While she was browsing through Sunberry's vegetables, I took a clear look at Dee. Although youth had not left her yet, the first signs of age were starting to show in her eyes. Her coat was coal-gray, with a darker gray mane that fell graciously straight behind her head. Her face was beautiful but at the same time, she inspired authority, like the one of a teacher. She smiled gently to Sunberry as she bought a couple of turnips, then she turned to look at my stand. Then, as I was looking her eye to eye, I was struck by realization. Maybe her coat was a bit more coal-gray than graphite-gray, maybe the mane was a bit shorter, but Dee Cleff was a dead ringer for Octavia!

"Good evening, young one." She gave me a gentle smile. "I haven't seen you around. Are you new here?"

"Yes ma'am, and a good evening to you too. It's my first day in the Plaza." I bowed gently and smiled. The first rule of selling was to always keep the customer satisfied.

"Well, look at you, how polite! What's your name?"

"Farsight, ma'am. And I'm going to guess that you're Dee Cleff."

"You guess right, Farsight. You know who I am, don't you?"

Watch out, Farsight, because this one is a tricky question. I had noticed a hint of change in her attitude towards me, it had become... colder.

"Oh, as far as I'm concerned, you're a customer at my stand, and that's all that matters. Everything else doesn't care right now."

"That's one of the wisest answers I've heard!" Dee laughed, loosening the tension. "What do you have for sale?"

“Not much right now, to be honest. I sell scavenged goods, and I work by the day, so if you want to have better chances of finding something, I would recommend you to come by noon. However, I still have a couple of things you might find interesting.”

Dee Cleff looked at the stand, whistling a gentle tune, until she noticed the small RoboDoggy on a shelf. She smiled again and pointed at the toy.

“How much for it?” she asked.

“Honestly, ma’am, I don’t know. I was surprised to find something so advanced in such a great state. I haven’t been able to compare it to anything in this market.”

“I’ll give you 1500 caps, that’s final. What do you say?”

“I’ll be delighted.” I answered with a broad smile on my face, and telekinetically moved the toy dog to Dee’s helper’s bag. She scribbled a note and gave it to me. “*I owe Farsight 1500 caps, signed Dee Cleff.*” I looked at the note, feeling rather scammed.

“I don’t walk around with so much cash, Farsight.” Dee smiled again. “Come to the Music School tomorrow and Metronome here will pay you.”

Dee waved and turned around, ready to leave, when Sunberry spoke up.

“Miss Cleff, excuse me!” she called. “I’m sorry to bother you, but we’ve been experiencing some problems with junkies lately. The traders are worried, since we don’t know how to react. Many of us can’t defend ourselves...”

Dee shook her head and stomped the floor, bothered. Maybe Sunberry had been a bit too rash when addressing her?

“I know, and I feel so disgusted about it,” Dee groaned. “I’m trying to end up the drug business in Freedom Field, but as long as the Buckmares keep pumping chems into town, I can’t do much without starting a war, and that’s the last thing I’d want. I’ve worked very hard to achieve an actual peace, and I’m not going to throw it all away. However, honey, I promise I’ll try to talk to Saddle about this.”

She smiled and walked away from us, the rest of the vendors cheering her. I remembered Goldie’s words, and I noticed something didn’t match. Dee didn’t seem like a pretentious tyrant; instead, she looked like a godmother that took care of the inhabitants of Freedom Field, always caring for their welfare and safety. The people seemed to appreciate her, as everypony she crossed greeted her with a broad smile. Everything that Goldie had told me was starting to seem less real minute by minute. Once Dee’s retinue had left the market, Sunberry let go a long sigh.

“If she can’t do anything...”

“Well, I will,” I said. “At least, I’ll investigate a bit. I already told you, this card the junkie forgot is making me suspicious.”

“Just take care, OK?”

“I will. By the way, do you know of a place to sleep around here?” I asked.

“Nuh-uh. I usually sleep out here in the stand. Come, I’ll share my dinner with you.”

“Thanks, Sunberry. You know, you can keep the dress. It’s the least I can do.”

“Awww, thanks. You sure can be nice.”

The dinner was just a boiled turnip, but it felt like actual glory after a hard day’s work. However, all the effort had paid off, as I already had a juicy pouch and the promise of another 1500 caps waiting for me at the Music School. The day had left other things for me to worry about. I hated to see junkies wandering around town, making all of us feel insecure. Moreover, I hated to see a junkie with some relationship to the Followers of the Shy. I would have to dig a bit deeper there, since something told me that the jolly healers I was helping with my scavenging weren’t as good and kind as I had initially thought. But first I’d have a good night’s sleep.

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The day was cold and dark, with a thick cloud cover hiding the sun. The morning activity in Freedom Field was frantic, with heavily guarded caravans crossing the township in and out of New Pegasus, small time traders and vendors mounting their stands in the side streets, and gang goons doing their morning patrols. I had woken up early to take a look at the Buckmares' setup before I started the scavenging for the day.

“Come to the Four Little Diamonds! We have the best booze in town, the hottest tables and the sexiest mares around! The Four Little Diamonds is the place to go if you want to have a good time!”

A flamboyant mauve mare was announcing the Four Little Diamonds Casino in the main street of Freedom Field, dressed in a skimpy white dress. Whoever had thought that a mare like that would make a good announcer for the casino had been a true visionary. Every single pony, both stallion and mare stopped and looked at her, and in the meantime, heard whatever she had to say.

The Four Little Diamonds was my first target in my mental list, since it was the main base of the Buckmare Gang, who, according to the traders and Dee, was the one syphoning the drugs into the city. Therefore, I got closer to see what the mare was announcing. At first I thought she was some kind of stage performer, an actress or singer, like the ones at the Stable, but a second, more in-depth look proved me wrong. The mare wasn't that flamboyant from up close. She wore heavy makeup to hide the age and the marks of what I thought had to be drug abuse. Also, the skimpy dress blatantly tried to drive the attention to her flanks, which led me to realize she was a prostitute.

So, the Buckmares were on the whore business, apart from the drug dealing.

I trod past the crowd that the mare had gathered and entered a side street full of ruined, crumbling blocks. Next to the city wall on the far end of the street, two buildings stood out from the rest since they were on a far better state. One had a big billboard with four gemstones on a straight line, the Four Little Diamonds; and right across the street, a black and electric blue sign announced that you were about to enter the Tesla Bar. Goldie hadn't lied on this one, as they were literally knocking on each other's doors. It was time to start my little investigation, so I pushed the door to the Four Little Diamonds and entered.

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Smoke filled the air, making it difficult both to see and to breathe. Not like there was too much to be seen inside the Diamonds, but breathing was mandatory. Coughing lightly, I walked into the main room of the casino. It wasn't much of a blast of light and color, as I had imagined by watching the display of billboards in the New Pegasus Strip, in fact, The Four Little Diamonds was far more down-to-earth than that. The walls were coated in a nasty ochre, which was most probably a consequence of the year long exposure to whatever the smoke was. The hall was some sort of show-restaurant lounge, with a big stage set along the main wall of the room. A cluster of tables with their respective chairs and linen were distributed along the space of the room, leaving the opposite side for a counter and, what I assumed from the smell coming from beyond a closed door, a kitchen. Behind the counter, a staircase climbed to a higher level of the building, most probably reserved for rooms for those customers looking for prepaid company. My suspicion was quickly confirmed when an overexcited stallion let go a loud moan of pleasure, which was followed, not without a fine sense of humor I might add, by frantic pounding of the floor and cheers from the audience in the restaurant. Opposite to the entrance was a small door with a sign that read “Tables” above it. The casino area, was my guess.

I trod down to one of the tables and started looking around the place, trying not to attract too much attention. A waiter dressed on a grey livery with the face of a mare painted on it asked me for my order.

“Breakfast, please,” I said without looking.

“Right now, sir!” was the waiter's answer, and left for the kitchen.

The waiter returned holding a tray with a bunch of charred pieces. At first I thought it was some sort of root or something, but then I realized that the blackened bits on the tray were actually meat. After having eaten a radroach stew in the Fort, it wasn't that much of an outrage to eat meat; actually, I was starting to enjoy it. The waiter left the tray carefully on the table and left.

I used my telekinesis to drag a piece of meat into my mouth and started chewing it. Its taste was in the middle point between dirt and ash. Whatever it had been in life, the cook had almost exorcised it on the pan. While I was eating my breakfast, I kept looking at the entertainer, a lousy wannabe stand-up comedian ghoulish pony in a striped suit that kept making jokes about zebras walking into a bar; corny jokes that no pony laughed to.

“Hey, what do we have here? How are you, sweetie?” a voice asked near me. A young female griffin, her white head towering two or three heads above the rest of the audience in the casino, had sat close to me. Even if her armored talons and wings made her look menacing, she was openly trying to flirt with me. She kept looking me with a seductive face, which, to be honest, was starting to turn me on.

“Oh, I’m doing fine, honey.” I smiled and talked fancy. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Stuka Talonblade, and you are?”

“Farsight; nice to meet you. What brings you around here?”

“I work in the Casino, but don’t get me wrong. I’m not one of Saddle’s mares.” She scowled.

“Really? Then what are you?” I asked with a look of friendly irony in my face.

“Adjoint to the General Manager. Bet you never expected that.”

“Nope, not even in my wildest dreams.” I nodded. “Indeed, you don’t look like the typical whore; unless, of course, there is a part of the clientele that likes armor and talons. But hey, I’m new around here, so who knows?”

“Why is it? Do you like talons?” her voice purred and her eyes narrowed.

It was time to take a risky gamble. I could either be slashed by a rageful griffin, or I could have a good time and use her as an informer... all right, I’ll be honest. I did it for the good time.

“No, talons are a bit too sharp for me,” I purred as well, “but I love feathers.”

“Oh, what a charmer.”

“Thank you, I work hard on my social skills. Being a loner in this town forced me to learn all the tricks in the book. Can I buy you a drink?”

“That’s page one in the book, you know.”

“It’s page one because it always works.” I smiled sarcastically.

“I’ll give you that.” She nodded.

“What will it be, then?”

“Beer.”

“I thought you were more of the whiskey type.”

“Whiskey? Do I look like an angsty security guard?”

“I don’t know about the angst, but with that armor and that pistol holstered on your, by the way, gorgeous waist; I’d say you totally fit the picture of a security guard.”

“Ah, *touché*. You’re right, I do take care about the security; but I think I can take a break for a while.” She giggled joyfully.

I ordered two beers and we sat down for a long while, chatting about nonsense. I felt both surprised and proud, since I had never thought it could be that easy to chat a mare up... well, a griffin, properly speaking. After around half an hour of beers and soft laughs, she lifted me in her talons and flew up to the mezzanine leading to the upper level, then she dragged me down the hallway to her room, and before I could even mutter a single word, I was lying naked on her bed.

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Life gives you lessons; sometimes bad, sometimes good, and rarely, very rarely, life gives you one of those

lessons you wouldn't forget until the day you died; this being one of those lessons. Thank Celestia, I'm a quick learner.

"First time with a griffin, honey?" Stuka laid beside me on her bed, her wing gently embracing me.

"Yes." I was being sincere, as it had been my first time EVER, and I was exhausted. All of my body was in pain, but it had been totally worth it. Now I had to keep my mind cold, to obtain something else than a good time with a smoking hot griffin. "Why do you ask?"

"You seemed a little nervous at first," she giggled, "but you got the hang of it very quickly."

"Everypony says I adapt quickly to the situation." I smiled and shivered as her feathers caressed my back. I had a feather fetish, I had to admit it. I suppose that Spitfire was my first crush as a colt, the mare I dreamed of while I grew up; therefore, my dream mare would always be a pegasus, but in the meantime, a young fit griffin would do.

"Why don't you tell me a bit about you, Farsight, dear?"

I meditated about the answer. I didn't want to be totally sincere, since I didn't trust Stuka. She was on the payroll of the Buckmares and I didn't want her to know more than the necessary about me, so I made up a convenient story that couldn't be refuted.

"Oh, not much to tell." I looked at the dirty ceiling as I spoke. "I'm a small time merchant in Trader Plaza, I earn my caps by scavenging abandoned buildings."

"And how did you get that PipBuck?" she wooed softly. The question, though, was a loaded gun. A slight mistake here and all my story would be jeopardized.

"Family keepsake." I shrugged. "I got it from my dad, when he passed away; he got it from his. I suppose some of my ancestors lived in a Stable for a time. How about you, Stuka?" I tried to divert the topic of the conversation.

"I used to be a Talon, some time ago." She looked away from me, and her mood dropped. She seemed to be wondering whether to tell me about her past, which seemed to be unpleasant; or to hide it.

"Really? I don't know what the Talons are, to be honest. Would you mind enlightening me?"

"They're mercenaries; the best you can get in the Wasteland. An elite corps, composed by griffins only."

Her tone was proud and firm, but I noticed a slight darkening in her voice, as if there was something that hurt her in what she was telling me.

"You said you used to be a Talon... what happened then?" I asked.

Stuka didn't respond, and kept looking at the wall; her mind lost in the thoughts of her past. Her expression showed a cold calmness, like the peace before the storm. I rolled and embraced her, trying to make her feel comfortable, because I wanted her to talk. She wrapped her wing around my body and we laid in silence.

"Come on, Stuka. You can tell me. It will make you feel better." I whispered soothingly.

"...OK." She sighed and cleared her throat. Her tone was peaceful, as if she was discussing any kind of nonsense, but there was a hint of darkness in it; a deep, haunting feeling from the past. "I used to be a Talon, under the orders of Reggie Grimfeathers, back in the day. I was young... well, younger; and ambitious, and I broke a rule. I didn't withhold the Contract. I tried to get some extra caps for myself by doing a side job, but I got caught. Getting caught usually means execution, or worse, but Grimfeathers banished me instead. I was to fly far away and never look back. That lead me here. Saddle hired me despite knowing about my past, so I owe him much."

I could understand her. She had thrown her life down the drain for confronting the establishment, almost a copy of my own life story. Suddenly, I felt bad for staging this masquerade, for I had the feeling that she and I were comrades, two souls that had committed the same crime and had faced the same punishment. However, I quickly realized that I was in too deep to be sincere now. If I wanted to come out of this one, I'd have to keep my armor of lies, no matter how bad it could make me feel.

Silence fell upon us as Stuka finished telling her story, and I found myself unable to give a retort. I found out I cared more about the griffin than what I would have expected at first, and her story had hit me like a hammer; making me feel sorrowful as well. I guess that's what they call empathy.

"Gee, Stuka. If only I could do something for you..." I started after a long silence.

"Don't worry, dear. You've already given me more than I asked for." She grinned, the darkness gone from her face; or at least properly hidden by a sincere smile. "You're the first one that has willingly listened to me, trying to offer me comfort. You're the kindest pony I've ever met." That one went directly to my feelings, no pony had seen me as kind before. "If you ever need me to do something for you, tell me."

"I will," I said, "but not now."

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I left the Diamonds with no information about the Buckmare Gang and its drug businesses. I could have asked Stuka about it, but my feelings of guilt had refrained me from doing it, and now I was regretting that. She could have told me all the secrets of Saddle's criminal operation, but I had preferred to snuggle her a bit more... Celestia burn me with the sun. Now I had no leads to find out what was going on between the Buckmares and the Followers, because I was pretty sure that something was going on.

Why did I think so? Well, there were a series of reasons. First of all, the card I had obtained from the junkie in the market, carrying the emblem of the Followers of the Shy; which told me that the junkie had been in the Fort some time ago. Either that, or he had received the card from a Follower somewhere else. However, as far as I knew, the Followers didn't venture themselves in the streets of Freedom Field, they waited for the patients to come to them. When I fainted, I hadn't been rescued by the Followers. Instead, some unknown inhabitants had dragged me all the way to the Fort, stealing my jumpsuit in the process.

Secondly, and related to it, the fact that I hadn't been given a card. If I had obtained one of those, I would have thought that it was customary for the Followers to give a little keepsake to the ones that were healed by them. However, it wasn't like that, and Sunberry had told me that she went to the Fort to have a fever healed. She didn't get a card either, so that meant there were 'special' patients that received the trinket as part of their treatment.

Last but not least, the fact that it appeared that the drug and chemical business was heavily polarized around both the Followers and the Buckmares, and how they seemed to get along with each other. The words of Goldie sounded in my head, so pretentious and void. Her praise of Saddle Buckmare found a new meaning in my head. They clearly had something going between them, but right now, I had nothing to start sniffing around.

Lady Luck, however, can be very capricious at times. Sometimes she'll kick you in the flank, but other times she'll give you a gentle, loving kiss; and this was one of those times. While I was wandering around, the door to the Diamonds opened and a silvery gray pony with a very respectable look came out of the Casino, dressed in an old hazel brown suit. He looked like a Pre-War businesspony, wealthy and charming with his clean cut mane and his sturdy way of walking around, surrounded by a swarm of goons clad in Buckmare armors. I didn't have to be the brightest pony around to notice I was looking at Saddle Buckmare, and by the looks of things, he was in a hurry, headed for a meeting. A meeting that had to take place in neutral ground, as he was leaving his casino.

I started following him, sometimes going through a side street or even through an open building, just to avoid attracting his guards' attention. I thanked Celestia that Stuka wasn't accompanying him, or I would have been unable to tail him undetected. Following a tortuous route across barren side streets and wrecked buildings, Buckmare was trying to discourage anypony from following him. However, Freedom Field wasn't that big and I could keep him pinpointed at every moment.

Finally, Saddle and his crew stopped in an alley close to the city wall. Before they could notice, I hid in an open dumpster, praying to the Goddesses that no pony would care looking in them, or I'd be done for. I could hear Saddle whispering something to his goons, and then the noise of trotting hooves grew louder, which meant that somepony else was coming. The meeting was about to take place.

“Here I am,” a male voice grunted. I supposed it was Saddle’s, “what do you want to discuss?”

“Why the long face, Saddle?” a feminine voice replied. It was Goldie! Not that it was much of a surprise, but it came to certify my suspicion that there was some hidden business between the Followers and the Buckmares. Now, I just had to figure out what it was all about.

“You know I don’t like walking around these streets. You don’t know who could be listening!”

“Oh, shut up, Saddle! If anypony is peeking, your bucks will find him and teach him a lesson, or am I confused?”

“I guess you’re right. Why did you call me here?”

“We need you to sell more.”

“To sell more? Do you think I’m a supermarket or something? My bucks can’t produce any faster, and you know that!”

“They’ll have to, or our customers will start going rebellious. We can manage an increase of population in our rehabilitation wing; what we can’t manage is a full-scale riot. Besides, I’ve heard news of junkies attacking the traders this very morning. We. Don’t. Want. That. Understood?”

Rehabilitation wing? A blaze of light struck my mind, but what I saw was so hideous that it made me want to cry out. Could it be like that? Could Goldie be associated to Buckmare in a addiction-rehabilitation scam? Was that what Fluttershy taught them? And to think I had admired Goldie and her crew... I felt dirty, played around, so angry and enraged that I had a hard time avoiding making any noise.

“Yes.” Saddle sighed. “Talking about that very thing, I had a very nasty message from Dee today. Apparently, the traders talked to her yesterday about the increasing amount of junkies, so she told me to stop the flow of drugs into town. Like I’m going to listen to her.”

“Be careful, Saddle. I know you hate her, I do as well. If I could, I’d stick a rebar in that cunt’s brain, but right now we can’t handle a war. You know that she outnumbers us in three to one. Even a dimwit like you can figure out what would happen.”

“Watch out, Goldie. I have a short temper, and you know what I’m capable of.”

“Yada yada yada. You and I know that I’m the one wearing the pants in our relationship. Both here and in bed.”

“Goldie, you’re going too far.”

“You think I care? Listen up everypony! Saddle Buckmare and I get it on every night! And he’s my little bitch!” Goldie went silent and waited a bit. “You see? No pony has heard us.”

I was starting to feel numb inside the dumpster. I hadn’t moved in some good thirty minutes and I was hiding in a rather uncomfortable position, so I felt as if ants were marching up and down my legs. Besides, I was starting to feel rather cold, and the series of revelations I had heard in such a short time had me, literally, on the verge of shaking.

“OK, but cut it out.” Saddle gave a curt response. “Does the population know about your sidejob rehabilitating junkies?”

“No, you fool, I keep it secret. Only a few trusted Followers help me out with this. Also, the junkies carry a distinctive trinket to help us identify them.”

“A trinket?”

“A playing card with our emblem. It’s not something that a mugger would rob, and it won’t attract the attention of anypony in a city where gambling is so common.” Wrong again, since it had already attracted my attention. “You understand? Good. How are your contacts with the Coilites going?”

“Not good.” Saddle grunted. “Those bastards don’t want to talk about an alliance. Their leaders are so isolationist that they just can’t understand that taking Dee out of the picture would increase the slice of pie

they'd get."

"Keep working, Saddle. If we want to take down Dee's gang, we need to be ready to act swiftly, and we need the Coilites. A long war would attract the unicorns."

The unicorns? What the hell were they talking about? What would an all out war attract to Freedom Field? Were the Followers and the Buckmares going to attack Dee Cleff's gang? And most importantly... what was this itch in my nose? No... I couldn't sneeze...Ah...Ah...

**ATCHOO!!**

"Who's there?" Saddle yelled. Crap. My cover had been blown.

Before I could try to do a run for it, the dumpster that hid me shifted and turned, hurling me outside, and I fell headfirst onto the cold and hard asphalt. When I rose my head, I saw myself surrounded by armored goons, many guns pointed at me. Goldie and Saddle looked at me from behind.

"Look who we have found, it's my newest scavenger." Goldie snickered.

"Is he one of yours?" Saddle yelled, enraged.

"No. He's just... convenient." Goldie waved a hoof. "Knock him cold, but don't kill him. I want him alive. He's going to have to answer to some questions."

Before I could open my mouth to say anything, a hoof slammed into my head and everything faded to black.

#

Note: Reputation change.

Freedom Field: Irrelevant. You're just another pony passing by Freedom Field, so the rest won't notice you... unless you draw their attention.

Buckmares and Followers: Shunned. These gangs have reasons to think you're a menace towards them, so they won't treat you kindly. At all.

## Chapter 3: Welcome To The Jungle

*“Hello there, everypony, this is Mister New Pegasus wishing a great morning to you all. Remember that you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, the favourite station in the whole of Neighvada! One note of advice, my dear listeners. It’s cold out there, so remember to grab a coat or a scarf. I don’t want any of you to fall ill. Oh, yes, this last bit of musical magnificence was part of a legendary record by Sweetie Belle. What a voice, isn’t it true?”*

*Let’s move on to the news, shall we? Yesterday, in response to the announcement of the reopening of the Platinum Horseshoe, the Ferratura family called the press for an important announcement, and this humble reporter was there, of course. After having waited for hours in an overcrowded room, finally the big chairman of the family, Verrazano Ferratura, climbed up to the stage. The announcement was short: he had gathered all the press in town to introduce his son Sandmound to the world.*

*Young Sandmound was introduced as the new blood to the Ferratura family and to the Clops Casino and Resort. Verrazano, as his father, said he was intelligent, charming and a great organizer. You’ll think this is all promotional chatter, and so did I. Therefore, wishing to bring you nothing more than the best and freshest information, I tried to have a personal chat with Sandmound himself. I had to sweat a bit, but I managed to have a ten minute interview with him.*

*I presume that almost every one of you knows about Verrazano, and how he acts. The tales of his ruthlessness and aggressiveness span across all Neighvada; so you might have thought that his son is pretty much the same. I’m sorry to prove you wrong, folks! In my small chat with young Sandmound he appeared to me as a charming young buck, well educated and intelligent, and with a kind heart. Running a Casino is a rough business, and he knows it, but he’s ready to face it with a smile, or so he said. From this station, I would like to wish him the best of luck.*

*Moving to other issues, the City Board has issued a formal complaint to the delegation of the New Equestrian Republic in response to Ambassador Merry Fields’ statement of yesterday. The Board Council wants to make clear that New Pegasus is and shall be an independent and sovereign city, and demands that the Republic puts all the cards on the table, letting the citizens of New Pegasus know of its true intentions.*

*My take on all this issue is that the Ambassador of the NER has made a mistake when choosing the words for her statement. So far, the diplomatic relationship between the Republic and the City has been just spotless, with successful trade agreements and mutual shows of appreciation. Therefore, it’s quite surprising to see such a change in the way the Republic views Neighvada. Let’s hope it was all a big faux pas.*

*Now, let’s return to the sweet, sweet music. I’ve got more Sweetie Belle here, ready for your enjoyment! Just forget your worries and let your mind drift with her majestic voice. And remember, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I’m Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

My head hurt.

I could literally feel my brain pulsating inside my skull, sending ripples of pain across my body, just as if an army of ponies were marching to an unknown beat in my head, their hooves rhythmically stomping my battered mind. I tried to think, but the headache was too powerful. What had happened to me was the thing I was trying to remember, fighting against the numbness in my brain.

The last thing I clearly remembered was leaving the Four Little Diamonds after having enjoyed a morning of passion with Stuka; which had radically changed my opinion towards griffins. I once saw them as muscled hulks meant to fight, natural born predators, people not to mess with. After meeting Stuka, however, I had realized that they could also be tender creatures with a heart as big as their talons. Too bad we were committed to different goals, as I was trying to make a living for myself and she had a contract towards Saddle Buckmare.

Wait a minute, Buckmare... the name punched a hole through the wall of clouds that filled my numb mind. I

had seen Buckmare come out of the Casino, surrounded by a flock of guards. After that I had followed him through a myriad of side streets, trying not to lose him at all cost. Finally, I had hidden in a dumpster because of something I didn't remember right now...

Oh, yes, of course; I hid because they stopped and I had to remain unseen, the dumpster being the only possible place. That would explain the stench my nose had started to perceive. Yes, my body was like that when waking up, it was totally desynchronized. Usually my mind would be the first part to regain consciousness, and then the rest of the body would gradually 'connect' back to it, giving way for these awkward returns to the living world.

Who were they waiting for? I know I didn't see anypony more since I hid in the dumpster, but I heard voices; voices that weren't unknown to me. It was a mare's voice, a mare that I had associated to good and kindness, a voice that had been my guide to this new world I now lived in: Goldie.

The floodgates opened and the memories quickly returned to my mind. I had been following Saddle Buckmare because I wanted to investigate the flow of drugs in Freedom Field, mainly because I had been 'attacked' by a junkie in Trader Plaza. That same junkie had dropped a playing card with the emblem of the Followers of the Shy, which had ignited my suspicions. That, and Dee Cleff's awkward response, trying to avoid any implication, had sparked my will for answers. Therefore, I had gone to the Diamonds to look for some leads to the Buckmare-Follower drug issue, assuming there was something, but the only thing I had obtained was a good time and a possible friend inside the Buckmares.

In consequence, I had had no other choice than to do things all by myself, and luck had smiled at me by giving me a chance to follow Saddle himself to a meeting with Goldie. There I had learned about the devious setup they had running: Saddle's crew got drugs into town, either by smuggling them from outside or by brewing them; then, they'd sell it to the junkies, who, once they had been high and were fighting with abstinence syndromes, would head to the Followers to get 'rehabilitated', just to return to Buckmare for another dose. In a nutshell, they would have an endless loop of addicts dumping their hard-earned caps into the pockets of the two gangs. Side effects were simple: the population of junkies would increase day by day, since the death toll was minimal thanks to Goldie's tender love and care. Also, the population of Freedom Field, more and more hooked to the drugs, would end up falling into total poverty.

However, this wasn't the end to their scheming. The final purpose of all this setup was to gather enough money to start a war for the control of Freedom Field. From what I had heard, though, I understood that they still depended on forging an alliance with the isolationist Coilites, which wasn't close to happening. Then Goldie had said something about attracting a bear, which still had me puzzled; and then I had blown my cover and had been knocked out cold by Buckmare's goons.

And here I was right now.

I opened my eyes to find myself in an old, dusty bedroom; shackled to an iron bed frame that had been tipped over. Therefore, I stood upright, my forelegs tied to the upper part of the frame, my hindlegs to the lower part. The light streamed into the room through two dirty windows that hadn't had their glasses shattered, allowing me to see the small bits of dust fluttering in the air. The floor was covered with dirty checkerboard tiles, the white ones turned gray and the black ones turned gray as well, only a tad darker than the white ones.

Once again, I found myself naked. What was it with Wasteland ponies and undressing their captives? It was something I couldn't understand. If I was to be questioned or, Celestia please don't want it, tortured, at least they could have left me with something on, so that I didn't feel so cold and exposed. Besides, being held in this position was starting to make me feel numb once again.

The door opened and Goldie entered the room, looking at me with a smug face. A guard was following her, but she waved a hoof to let him know that she wanted to be left alone with me. I felt anger boil up in me as I looked at my captor. I felt betrayed and outraged by her two-facedness, but most of all, I wanted answers.

"You're awake again." She smiled and walked up and down the room. Her smile wasn't sweet anymore, it was cold and menacing.

"Nice to see you, Goldie," I spewed. "I see you're doing fine."

“My, my. Polite to the very end, what a gentlecolt.” Her voice had a hint of mockery in it.

“Yes, that is me... a polite fool, for having believed you.”

“Believed me? Believing me in what?”

“Thinking you were kind; thinking you really cared about the rest of the ponies; thinking your goal was noble. Believing the speech you gave me when we met.”

“I don’t understand you.” Goldie seemed puzzled.

“And now you play fool on me?” I roared, shaking. The metal bed frame clunked as it tilted. “Fuck you, Goldie. How can you be so cold when you’re driving this city into chaos? Where are your vows to your creed?”

“My vows? Oh, you mean THAT!” Goldie started laughing out loud, tears coming from her eyes. I clenched my teeth, red with anger. If I hadn’t been tied up, I would have jumped at her and torn her apart with my own hooves. She chuckled and breathed deep, forcing herself to regain control.

“My, Farsight, you sure are naive.” Goldie shook her head. “Things aren’t black and white, you know? Well, you come from a Stable, so I guess the world down there is different. Let me open up your eyes, dear: our beloved Fluttershy, the very pony we adore and follow, was the one that turned Equestria into the Wasteland. She thought that making things even would be the best way to force an end to the War, and up to a point, she was right.”

“You can’t be serious.” That was impossible... Fluttershy had been the Mare of the Ministry of Peace! She had fought (figuratively speaking, of course) to bring peace and understanding in the dire times of the War between ponies and zebras. How could she be responsible of the destruction that followed?

“I have never lied to you, Farsight. I might have told you half the truth, but every single thing you’ve heard from my lips was true; and this is true as well. Fluttershy gave the megaspell technology to the zebras. She made possible that the striped ones built their balefire bombs. She brought darkness to the world, and what drove her to do it? Kindness, pure and simple kindness.”

“That’s bullshit, Goldie. I’m not buying that.” I shook my head in disgust. However, something in my mind had started clicking, something in the depths of my brain was processing that information and telling me it was logical. If the megaspells hadn’t been given to the zebras, the ponies would have won the War and caused a zebra genocide. What Fluttershy did turned a genocide into an apocalypse... the best of intentions had the worst of consequences.

“Have it your way, Farsight; you’ll end up realizing it’s true. You’re smart, I can feel that... I can almost hear your brain clicking as it tells your poor Stable pony heart that you’ve been told the truth.” Goldie smirked and got close. “And I’m just like Fluttershy... I’m driven by kindness.”

“You’re not driven by kindness, you slut!” I yelled, hurting my vocal chords in the process. “You’re just a greedy bitch with no ethics, that wants to bleed this town dry by turning everypony into drug addicts!”

“Is that so?” Goldie chimed. “Then you’re not that smart, dear... you’re just the common fool with a big mouth. My only driving force is kindness, kindness towards the poor junkies. My reasons are simple, Farsight: whatever I do, Saddle is not going to stop selling drugs, since that’s his only way of making money. His mares are old and ugly, his food is just disgusting, his entertainment is sub par and his casino can’t cope with all the costs. Therefore, he’s taken over the drug business in town, and I’m faced with tons of addicts falling dead on their tracks as they take one shot too much. My vows towards the Creed of the Shy were simple: I shall do no harm, and I shall seek the healing of every living being; thus, I decided to provide my help to the junkies. However, to deter them from starting over again, I started charging them some caps. This way, the Followers would fund themselves. My attempts to stop the addiction, though, proved useless as the junkies returned to Buckmare and got high again. If you can’t beat your enemy, at least, profit from it. That’s why I decided to contact Saddle and establish a pact. We’d be doing the same, but we would coordinate our efforts to make things go... smoother; and at the same time, we needed to hide our efforts from our enemies.”

I was enraged, but my logic mind admitted the plan was flawless, and that it could be fit into Goldie’s vision

of the world. It was kindness, indeed, but it wasn't pure; it was corrupted, warped and mutated kindness. Anyway, I had to give Goldie the point of coherence, as every detail had been carefully orchestrated; every detail except for the one that had driven me to find out about their scheming.

"The card."

"Exactly." She nodded. "The card, the same card we found in your pocket. That was our way of identifying the junkies that were already in the rotation. Too bad that he dropped his card... too bad for you, of course. I can't let you live anymore."

So this was it... after having spoken to me and having obtained information from me, she'd kill me. I had been such a fool! By letting my anger speak through my mind, she had found out all that I knew; and unwillingly, I had let her know that I was aware of her addict rehabilitation scam. Now I wasn't convenient anymore, I was a problem to deal with. Thus, I had two options: I could wait for my death or I could try to buy myself some time. Of course, I chose the second.

"You've spoken about enemies." I tried to keep Goldie occupied. As long as she kept talking to me, she wouldn't kill me, would she?

"Yes. You can't make money in Freedom Field without making some enemies." Goldie gave me a questioning glare and then she shrugged. "Is this your final will? Do you want me to tell you my plans before I have you killed?"

"Sounds like a fair deal to me." I tried to shrug as well. "But it's your call."

"What the hell... you won't live to see tomorrow, so I might as well tell you my plans."

It had worked! I had to hide a smile of triumph, as I had most probably bought myself a couple of hours before she decided to have me executed. The chances of survival were slim, but at least I could keep trying to think something.

"As I was saying," Goldie continued, "Saddle and I are very worried about the enemies that loom around us, namely that bitch Dee Cleff and her goons. She thinks she's the bloody guardian angel of Freedom Field, trying to stop the drug business in town. Yesterday she sent a message to Saddle in a rather menacing tone, demanding him to stop dealing drugs. Who does she think she is to talk like that? Saddle wants to take her out of the picture, and so do I. With Dee's gang out of the picture, we could carry on with our business and run Freedom Field without opposition."

"And you think the people will allow it?"

"Why wouldn't they? We have guns, for Luna's sake! We've dominated this town for years now, while she did nothing but visit the traders every now and then. We've kept the town safe and healthy when the raiders attacked it, while Dee only cared about the power supply! We've given all we had for Freedom Field! The blood of Buckmare's ponies floods the history of this town, while Dee has done nothing! We deserve to rule this place!"

"You don't seem to understand it, do you?" I smirked. "You want to base your domination on fear, while Dee bases her power on the admiration that the people has on her. Come to a fight, the common folk of Freedom Field will support her, not you."

"You know nothing, Farsight." Goldie said with a cutting tone. "Nothing."

She walked close to me and passed her hoof down my belly. It could have almost have been interpreted as a caress, but I knew there was no good intention beneath it.

"Too bad we had to end up like this." Goldie whispered. "You and I could have done so much together."

She turned around and left the room, leaving me alone with two rough-faced goons that entered the room when Goldie left. My time was over.

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It turned out that they didn't want to kill me; not immediately, that is. Instead, Goldie had booked me a whole

treatment of body punishment before they had the kindness of blowing my brains out. It had been twenty minutes since Goldie had left, and I could swear that already I had two broken ribs and several chipped teeth. The guards she left me with had bucked me so hard I thought I was going to break in half.

However, I stood strong, looking at them in the eyes, because now I had purpose, as I had understood when speaking with Goldie. I had a life in Freedom Field; something to fight for. I had a rather respectable job as a trader, I was starting to feel sincerely appreciated by other ponies, like for example Sunberry Grass; and I even had found someone I felt connected to, even if it was madness. Therefore, I couldn't falter.

The thugs had gagged me so that my screams of pain didn't alert anypony around, so I had to be held prisoner somewhere close to the main streets. If I had been secluded somewhere like where the meeting took place, they wouldn't have worried about attracting anypony's attention. Then they had started using me as their punching bag.

You might think I was acting smug and resisting the pain, but I'm sorry to prove you wrong. I was squealing with every slam, tears flowing from my eyes as I gasped for air. All my muscles were tense, trying to offer as much resistance to the attacks as possible, but I wasn't strong enough. Every hoof slammed through my defenses, causing my body to convulse in agony. Stings of pain pierced every inch of my flesh, sending desperate pleas to my mind. Give up, they said. Faint. Lose it. Go to sleep.

But I wouldn't. After every hit I would try to look at my captors in the eyes, let them know that I wouldn't give in; and at the same time, I tried to focus on the hatchet that was hidden among my gear. A second of distraction and I would be able to lift it from the floor, and that would even things a little bit. However, the goons were professional. When one started to lose rhythm, the other one stepped forward to keep beating me up.

A hoof hit my face from side to side, and I tasted blood. I wished I hadn't been gagged, I would have loved to spit that blood into my captor's face. Instead, I could only swallow it, not without some effort. Its metallic taste made my gut churn. Then, without any warning, another hoof slammed right into my groin, and I was close to blacking out. The goon saw it, which made him launch another hoof right into the same place.

"Hey!" he called his colleague. "I think I've found this one's weak spot."

"You bucked him in the balls; what a discovery, indeed. Listen, I'm starting to get tired of this. Mister Gutsy here won't go down, and the boss told us to kill him. The only reason we're doing this is for fun."

"What, are you bored?"

"No, I'm hungry, so let's pop a cap in this bastard and go have something to eat."

The hungry goon picked a pistol in his mouth and aimed it to my head. Its black cannon promised a swift death, and at the site of that black gaping hole, I felt my will break. This time, all my hopes were dashed. Until that very moment, a little part of me was waiting for a miracle, for a moment of distraction that allowed me to grab a makeshift weapon or for somepony to come and save me. The current situation left no room for salvation, this time I was done for, and not even all my purpose would save me. I sighed and silently prayed to the Goddesses, while I closed my eyes and waited for the final detonation.

**BANG!**

That was it? I expected pain, suffering, something else. Instead, I had felt nothing, only the numbness and the pulsating pain from my previous wounds. Then, I noticed I was still breathing. What was going on? Had he missed? I opened my eyes and saw my captor looking at me with a puzzled face. Then, on a second look I noticed the gaping hole right between the eyes, blood slowly flowing out of it. What the hell was going on?

**BANG!**

This time I saw the other goon fall to his side as a bullet tore a hole through his head, painting the wall behind red. The one that had been about to kill me stood still before me, so I couldn't see what was happening right in front of my nose. I tried to move my head to push him aside, but I was too weak.

"There's somepony here!" a voice said behind my dead captor. "He's wounded... but alive."

“Untie him and get him to the School.” another voice replied. “I hate these Buckmares, they have no honor.”

“Yeah, I know, and I want them gone, but Miss Cleff wants to keep peace. It’s hard, though, with Buckmare selling drugs like candy around town.”

“Fucking maniacs.”

I silently thanked the Goddesses for sending me an angel. A hoof moved the corpse of the Buckmare goon and I found myself facing a stallion with a scarred face clad on an armor with a treble clef symbol. The Stringers, I presumed. I smiled and gave in to my body’s demands. Everything went black again.

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I woke up on a nice, clean, comfortable bed, and this time I wasn’t tied up or gagged. However, almost all my body had been carefully bandaged, and my right hindleg had been held in place with plaster. Apparently, the goons that gave me a beating broke some bones, but now I wasn’t feeling any pain at all. I saw I had been fed intravenously, since I had a catheter connected to my foreleg and a small bag of a translucent fluid was sending drop after drop to my veins. Probably, I had been stuffed with painkillers as well.

I tried to move my head and I made it. Good, at least my neck was in one piece; I just hoped my spine was too. I tried to move my hindlegs but they didn’t budge, locked as they were under an armor of plaster and bandage. My forelegs were responding, at least. I tried to lift my head with all my strength, but I couldn’t, so I guess I’d have to forget about looking around. Well, at least the ceiling looked good, as the paint wasn’t crumbling down like in the rest of buildings I had seen. There were no moisture stains either. In a nutshell, it was a neat ceiling.

Sweet Celestia, what was I talking about? Were the painkillers dumbing me down or something?

Suddenly, the door opened. I didn’t see it open, but the noise of an opening door sounded very clearly, so I assumed that the door had opened. You can imagine how cumbersome it can be to be looking upward without being able to move. I heard hoofsteps getting closer, and out of the blue, the head of a young mare appeared above me. I only noticed her big, almost endless sky blue eyes looking at me closely, as she blinded me with a flashlight. Then, she let go a slight sigh.

“You’re finally awake,” she said with a sweet high-pitched voice. “Those damn thugs hit you really hard. How are you feeling?”

“Had better days,” I replied. “I’m just a bit uncomfortable here, looking at the ceiling.”

“Oh, that, of course!” I could swear she facehoofed. “I knew I had to do something.”

“Don’t worry, just help me move, please.”

“Of course!”

I felt her envelope me with magic and carefully lift me from my position, softly moving me to a more upright one. Then I could get a good look at the room and at my caretaker, a petite peach colored unicorn mare with a short, green mane. She was wearing a simple white gown and had two small saddlebags strapped, almost overflowing with bandages and potions. She looked at me and smiled peacefully.

“How about now? Are you feeling better?” she asked.

“I’m in true delight now, baby.” I smiled at her. “Thank you.”

She blushed and left with a smile on her face. Well, that was unexpected. I was just trying to be kind to her by giving her praise, but she seemed to have taken it... differently. That was a facet of my personality I had never been aware of. Maybe I could use that for my advantage, why not?

Being in an upright position, I could easily take a look around the room I was in. This place was being taken care of, or at least it was kept clean. Old yet still brightly colored wallpaper covered the walls, and ornate bronze-colored lamps hung from the ceiling, bathing the room with a soft light. A fluffy, dark green rug covered the entire floor, damping the sound of hooves treading around. The bed I was in was made out of actual wood, and the sheets were crisp clean, even if a bit wrinkled. A small nightstand was located to the

side of my bed, a little piece of careful woodwork, lovingly crafted. Old black-and-white pictures of a beautiful city decorated the walls. From what I could see from the bed, my guess was that it had to be Pre-War Las Pegasus.

I then centered myself on the nightstand. I hadn't noticed that there was a note lying on the table, held down in place by an old alarm clock. The clock had been moved, as there was a slight change in the colour of the wood where the clock had been before. Therefore, the note had been recently placed there. I concentrated on the note and on the clock, in an attempt to use my magic to grab the note. My horn glowed gently and the clock lifted some centimeters, enough to move the note with care. Then, I dropped the clock and picked the note. The handwriting was spiky and nervous, as if it had been written under large distress. I also noticed that there were tear marks on the paper, as if the writer had been crying at the moment of composing the note.

*Dear Farsight,*

*If you're reading this, our little something is over, although I don't want to. When I heard my boss had captured you spying on him, I felt like struck by lightning. I don't know who you really are or what you're after, and I don't care, either. I just want you to know that you made me you made me feel happy. I felt like I owed you something for that, so now we're even. I told the Stringers where you were being held hostage... Hope they made it in time.*

*Stuka*

So it had been her... The note was like a spear thrusting at full speed through my heart. She cared for me, or so it seemed from the note, and from what she did. Nopony had openly shown me any sign of kindness, if there ever was somepony that actually cared for me. I felt guilty for what I had done to Stuka. Maybe, in other circumstances, we could have been together, who knows? But now, there was nothing to be done.

"Forget about her." A feminine voice sounded next to me. I lifted my head from the note to see a white mare with her black mane combed into a large topknot. She wore large, thick framed black glasses and a checkered dress. Suddenly, I remembered her: she was the pony that accompanied Dee Cleff when she visited the Trader Plaza! What was her name? Pacemaker... No, wait; it had something to do with music, but just I couldn't remember.

"What?" was my only response.

"I said you should forget about her; the griffin. I don't know what was going on between you two, and I swear to Celestia that I don't want to know; but whatever it was, she's still working for the Buckmares, and they don't like you."

She was right; after all, now I was a known face for Buckmare and his gang, and Saddle couldn't be too pleased of having me roaming around once more. Goldie wouldn't be very happy either. Therefore, the possibility of coming close to Stuka was very, very remote.

"Yes, it's probably the best thing to do." I sighed and tossed the note.

"Good. You're reasonable, at least." She picked the note and put it into a bin in the corner. "I'm Metronome, assistant to Dee Cleff. Welcome to Octavia's Music School."

"Thanks, I'm Farsight."

"I know, you've made yourself quite a name in a matter of hours, you know? Coming out of nowhere, making money by scavenging, and then spying? What's on your mind?"

"I just want to make a living." I replied, bothered.

"Then you're not too bright, are you? You could have made a living just by scavenging and selling. Why the hell did you mess with the Buckmares?"

"Why? Because of the damn junkies, that's why!" I groaned. "It is simply outrageous."

"I know, so keep this in mind, Farsight. Many of us want to end this disgrace. However, there are ways of doing it, and spying upon a secret meeting isn't the wisest one. If Saddle's griffin bodyguard hadn't liked

you, you'd already be rotting in the Wasteland. Don't forget this."

I nodded. Metronome's advice was wise, and I wasn't going to contradict the ones that had saved my sorry flank from a certain death.

"What will happen to me now?" I asked.

"Now? Now you rest and heal; then you'll work for us. After all, if you walk out alone the Buckmares will be waiting for you to step into a dark place to beat you up and kill you. We could have left you out on your own, but you seem to have some guts on you, and we like that. Therefore, you'll be part of our gang, no buts."

"Hey, I'm not complaining." Being part of the Stringers wasn't my best case scenario, but Metronome was right again. I was a wanted pony now, and being embedded in a gang structure would avoid trouble.

"Good, good. From the looks of your wounds, I'd say you'll be fine in two or three days. Once you can walk, come down and we'll talk business."

I nodded, and she turned around and left me alone with my thoughts. So I was now affiliated to the Stringers... Well, at least they looked like the 'good guys' in comparison to the other gangs in Freedom Field. They seemed to care about the common folk and their methods seemed more ethical. I might be headed to another deception but it was the life I had before me at the moment.

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Indeed, recovery took me three days, days that I used to read and learn about the world I was in. When the nurse pony came back to my room I asked if I could have something to read, and she came back with a couple of books in her saddlebags. Both of them looked rather new, which wasn't the common thing around Freedom Field. All the books I had seen since I had left the Stable were old and dusty, if they were readable at all. These, however, had to be rather recent, not only from their looks but from their content.

The first one was called *Wasteland Survival Guide*, written by somepony called Ditzzy Doo. A quick glance through the pages let me know that it was a compendium of useful information for the pony that ventured into the Wastes. The book had been divided into many chapters that discussed various matters such as the fauna of the Wasteland, the known predators, the flora, how to deal with radiation, how to repair weapons, tips and tricks for the occasional scavenger or medical procedures for common wounds. In a nutshell, it wasn't much of a fun read; instead, it was a helpful encyclopedia for survival. Just in case I might need it, I scanned it into my PipBuck.

The second one, however, was much more readable than the Survival Guide. Its name was *The Light Bringer*, and it was the story of a Stable Pony that left on a desperate quest to find a friend and ended up becoming the pony that saved the Wasteland, defeating powerful enemies and making great friends. The authors, Homage and Life Bloom, showed great prowess in telling the tale of that young mare, and I got hooked to it immediately. I spent the next two days reading almost non-stop, amazed by all the adventure that the little Stable mare went through, and how her determination drove her forward despite all the harshness of this world.

However, I felt puzzled. Was it true or was it fiction? The book mentioned places of old Pre-War Equestria such as Manehattan or Fillydelphia, and according to the story, the facts portrayed in it took place twenty years ago, so it could perfectly have been reality, in which case the book would be a biography. All things considered, though, the story ended up telling how the brave sacrifice of the protagonist had turned the Wasteland into a far less harsh place. The world I knew, however, kept being pretty much like the one in the beginning of the story; therefore, I couldn't clearly decide if I had been reading a historic document or just a delightful epos.

After three days of recovery in bed, the lovely nurse mare that had been taking care of me came to free me of my bandage and plaster prison. All the pain had disappeared and the only thing remaining was a subtle feeling of weakness, probably as a consequence of not having used my body in almost a week. When I got back on my hooves I felt my legs shake lightly under my own weight, which made me worry a little. However, the nurse mare told me that it was the usual behaviour of the body after a long time of inactivity. I dressed myself and packed my things. I had been able to recover all my gear, but my pouch was gone. Once

again, I was broke. I noticed that the nurse had left a small note on my nightstand as she was leaving, and I picked it up.

*Farsight,*

*Once you're back on your hooves, meet me at the Music Hall, down by the lobby. I have an assignment for you.*

*Metronome*

My life was changing pretty much, pretty fast. In a very short period of time I had been banished from a Stable, then from a City, then I had started working as a scavenger, and now I was nothing more than a gang goon. Sometimes I wanted the world to stop, but I learned the hard way that the only way of surviving here was by being able of keeping up with the pace, so I hastily got my tie on and exited the room.

I quickly remembered I hadn't been in this building before, conscious that is. It didn't take me long until I got lost in the hallways of the big Music School, and ended up exiting through a back door into a side alley.

The Stringers were, indeed, the most powerful gang in Freedom Field, and the reasons were pretty clear. Once I trotted back into the main Avenue, ponies wearing what I had realized was the emblem of the Stringers (a treble clef) started appearing everywhere. From colts and fillies with bandanas to full-grown mares clad in armor with the symbol printed on it, almost everypony in the area was affiliated up to some point.

A massive treble clef made of neon lights was hung on the front of the red brick building which I had left seconds ago. It was on a much better state than the surrounding ones. Below the clef, a shiny neon sign read "Octavia's School of Music". Octavia was a world-famous musician pony from before the war, if I recalled correctly, and I wondered if she did start this school herself or it had been just a catchy marketing technique. Truth was, this reminded me quite much of the devious Followers and their stupid Creed, who had taken a Pre-War pony as a godlike figure and roamed the world preaching her word. I really hoped these Stringer fellows weren't like the Followers of the Shy, for my own sake, as I pushed the door to enter the building.

The soft chime of a bell sounded as I entered the room. In the middle of the lobby was a ring-shaped desk with some terminals and a radio that hummed gently. The sound of a violin played by an unsteady hoof filled the air, stopping and starting over every now and then. I could hear voices coming from a nearby room, yet so muffled I couldn't tell what they were saying. Behind the desk, a cute mare with a faint pink coat and purple mane was filing papers and entering data on a terminal. She wore the treble clef symbol as a pendant hung from her neck. Everything would have been idyllic and almost out-of-this-world if it weren't for the two armed guards that hid cleverly in a small room, out of the first sight. This was, still, the headquarters of a warring gang.

"May I help you out with something, sir?" the mare on the desk asked with a smile.

"Yes." I smiled back. "I'm here to see Metronome... She must be waiting for me."

"Ok. I'll have to ask you to leave all your weapons at the counter, please."

The guards had moved from their hiding positions, making themselves fairly visible and intimidating. They wore a weapon system that was strapped to their backs and carried machine guns to the sides.

"Not a problem," I answered, and lifted the hatchet from my tool belt with my telekinesis, leaving it gently on the desk.

"Thank you." She grinned again. "Right now she's giving a lesson, but she'll be over shortly. Please wait over there," she said, and pointed a hoof to a door on the far end of the room.

A lesson? So this still was a music school? This world never stopped to amaze me. Logic was something that was definitely not required to live out here. As I walked towards the door, the music sounded louder, a lovely duo between the violin I had heard before and a cello handled with much more finesse than the violin. The tune grew in intensity and speed, making me feel actual shivers down my spine. Having been raised listening to classical music, this somehow brought faint memories of my foalhood; but whether I liked those memories

or not, that was not all that clear to me. While I was lost in my past, the music rolled down to a close.

“Okay, little filly. You’re doing good progress.” That was the voice of Metronome.

“Thank you, miss!” was the reply of the filly. She seemed happy.

“You’re welcome, honey. Remember to practice those works of Hayndel and Beethoofen I gave you last week.”

“Will do, miss!”

The door opened and a small, honey-colored filly came out running with an expression of utter delight on her face, a violin case held firmly in her mouth. The mare behind the counter gave me a sign of approval, so I entered the room.

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The room was decorated like an old music hall. A big stage covered the far end of the room, and rows of seats were distributed looking over towards it. Behind the stage curtains, which were open at the moment, a full body portrait of a mare playing the cello covered the wall. The mare’s coat was graphite-gray, with a darker gray mane that fell graciously straight behind her head, as she was standing on her hind hooves. Her face was of utter concentration as she held the fiddlestick with her hoof, and still, she looked breathtaking. She wore nothing but a cute pink bow tie on her neck, and her cutie mark was the treble clef I had been seeing all around the place ever since. Octavia, as I concluded, was idolized by everypony here.

On stage, Metronome was packing her cello into its case. Once again, she was wearing a comfortable-looking black and white dress, this time striped instead of checkerboard. She did resemble a zebra up to some point.

“So, you’re back on track, aren’t you?” She didn’t even look at me.

“Yes, at least I can walk on my own.” I replied. “Thanks for the medical help.”

“You don’t have to thank me for anything. I would have left you to rot in a side street, but Miss Cleff insisted in bringing you along. You should be thanking her.”

Well wasn’t she rude. I would have liked to give her a smug reply, but I knew it wouldn’t be very wise, so I refrained from speaking.

“Well, that does it.” Metronome packed the cello in the case and lifted her head to look at me. “OK, now let’s talk about your new assignment.”

“Please, go right ahead.”

“Here’s the thing. You know that Miss Cleff is a very cautious mare; she has to keep an eye out for almost everything in town, with so many threats to herself and to her interests looming around.”

“It’s pretty reasonable, yes. So what?”

“Well, Miss Cleff does many off-town trading businesses, with caravaneers, Wasteland scavengers, thoughtful Raiders, and so on. Since she doesn’t like that our gang members leave town, we use external agents as couriers.”

“Why can’t she use her own goons?”

“Because those goons are the ones that keep the town safe, that’s why. Besides, some of those trades are far from... legit, and Miss Cleff has a standard to keep. It’s a hard way to the top, almost everypony knows that. However, what only a few know is that it’s even harder to keep yourself up there once you’ve made it.”

“I understand, or at least, I think I do. Miss Cleff is like a pony on the high wire, if she leans too much to any side she can fall.”

“It’s a valid analogy; in fact, it’s a very good analogy.” Metronome shook her head, as if she had just remembered something. “Wait, wait, we’re just going off-topic here. As I was telling you, Miss Cleff uses couriers to do her trades; but one of these couriers has gone greedy and the case they had to deliver hasn’t arrived yet.”

“So you need me to go there and pick it up.”

“Quick thinker, eh? You almost got it. You’re going to pick it up, and you’re going to teach them a lesson. I want those motherfuckers dead, you hear me? No pony messes with Miss Cleff, understood?”

These were the good guys? Once again, I felt disgusted, as I couldn’t understand what was the need of being so violent. I already knew that the Wasteland was a harsh world, but something was so incoherent here. Dee Cleff acted like a protector to the ponies of Freedom Field, but could be ruthless with those that crossed her. I couldn’t stand so much hypocrisy.

“Hey! Is there something wrong with the assignment or what?” Metronome asked with an upset face.

“Just... Why do I have to kill them?”

“OK, Stable Pony, come down from the clouds. This isn’t the land of everlasting happiness and friendship, haven’t you noticed already? The only way of making your point clear is with a gun in your hooves. If you don’t kill these bastards, other couriers will understand they can play smart with us and that they won’t be punished for their actions. Let them live, and everypony will lose all respect towards our organization; and believe me, tenderhoof, the only thing, I repeat, the ONLY thing that keeps you on top is respect. Not fear, not love, not admiration, not friendship. Only respect. And now, we need to teach Freedom Field some respect.”

Respect... It was reasonable. Come to think of it, I hadn’t been shown any respect in my life. I had been kicked around, thrown off my home, pushed to the brink of destruction, beaten, tortured and used. Doing whatever it took to survive wasn’t the best way to earn respect, so maybe I would have to rethink my goal in life. Maybe I would have to fight to be respected.

“I understand your point.” I said coldly. “Forget all my doubts. How many of them are we facing?”

“Four or five.”

“Four or five? How am I supposed to face them alone?”

“I never said you’ll be facing them alone. This one is a two-pony job; your partner is waiting outside, I spoke to him earlier.”

“What’s his name?”

“You don’t need to know. You will just address him as ‘Mister Black’, and he’ll address you as ‘Mister Blue’. That is a standard security issue between externals. If anypony catches you, they’ll know you work for us, but they won’t know who else does.”

“Externals?”

“Yes, externals. Don’t expect a bunch of our ponies coming to save you if you mess things up. You’re on your own, you understand?”

“I don’t like this one bit, but I understand.”

“And I don’t give a single fuck about what you like or not; just do your job and shut the fuck up. Do you have a gun?”

“No, but you owed me 1500 caps.” I took out the small note.

“I know. Consider our debt paid.” She tossed a rifle towards me. “It’s a repeater rifle, magnum ammo. A good gun, precise and reliable; take care of her and she’ll do whatever you want her to do. Now go and bring me back that briefcase. The lock key is 333, just check it’s full.”

“I’ll be back.” I said firmly.

“Yeah, yeah. Come back with the briefcase, or don’t bother coming back.” Metronome turned around and left the room. There wasn’t much more to do there than leaving, so I headed back to the lobby.

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“You Mr. Blue?” somepony asked, a male voice with a funny, musical accent.

I looked around to see who had called me. It wasn't the pink mare in the reception desk, since the voice was male, and the guards were nowhere to be seen. However, there was one more buck in the room, so that had to be the one that had called me. His coat was stone-gray with... white pinstripes? What did that mean? Metronome was giving me a ZEBRA as a partner? I remembered what the teachers told us about zebras down in the Stable School. They were supposed to be fearsome warriors, ruthless and deadly; they could suck the life out of you, or control your mind with a brew. They killed Celestia and Luna, and were the ones to blame for our situation. Anyhow, once I came over my surprise, I found out there was nothing too outrageous about the zebra. He wasn't as striped as the zebras I had seen in the recordings; instead, his stripes were thin, almost inexistent at some points. His mane was a curly ball of black fur that stood on top of his head, funnily enough. He had also let his fur grow longer around his mouth, as if it was some kind of... moustache and beard? Was that possible, actually? I knew about spells that made fur grow like that, but he didn't seem like a spellcaster, anyway.

Apart from all that, he wore a slick black suit with a white shirt and black tie, which made him look even stranger in the middle of the Music School's lobby. Without even muttering a single word, he trotted up to me.

“And you're Mr. Black, I presume.” I gave him a stern look, action that he mirrored.

“Indeed, I am. You ready to go?”

“Let's get moving.”

I opened the main door and let Mr. Black through. I didn't like his looks, I didn't like my assignment and I didn't like teaming up with a zebra. However, there was few to be done about it. We attracted all the looks as we trotted through the crowded main streets of Freedom Field, and my companion didn't seem to bother. I was taking quick glances in all direction, looking for unknown threats, and had my E.F.S. on at all times. No hostiles for the moment.

“So, Mr. Blue” my companion started talking. “Metronome told me you're a Stable Pony. What is it like down there?”

Mister Black wanted to chat? What kind of lousy super-secret job was this? For Celestia's sake, he even knew I was a Stable Pony! Well, come to think of it, it wasn't that hard to notice, since I didn't hide my PipBuck at all. Whatever, maybe this chit-chat could make our job a bit more bearable; I just had to be careful not to tell him anything really personal.

“It's not that different” I told him. “The big picture is pretty much the same, but there are these small details that make it different...”

“Details?”

“Yes, small differences. For example, the fact that you don't have any natural light in there. It makes crops grow very dimly.”

“And why is that a problem?”

“Think about it. You have to feed many ponies out of those crops.”

“Pretty much true. How do they do it?”

“Strong rationing.”

“Strong rationing, yeah.” Mr. Black replied, nodding with a smile. “Can't you smuggle food down there?”

“There is no economy in a Stable.”

“Oh.” He seemed displeased. Then he stopped brusquely as he noticed something. “We're here.”

I floated my rifle close and cocked it. Mister Black picked a gun from a holster in his suit and hung it from a string that went from his hoof and around his neck, so that a quick tug to the string would propel the gun right into his mouth, ready for a quick shot.

“How many of them are up there?” he asked.

“Four or five.”

“Including our buck?” He winced.

“I don’t know. Four or five.”

“Damn. We should have shotguns for this kind of jobs.” Mister Black shook his head and entered the building.

This place was no different to the buildings I had scavenged before. Dirty walls with falling paint, moisture marks all along, closed apartments that hadn’t been used in almost two hundred years. However, in the second floor there was a trace of activity. The dust in the hallway had been swept apart, and there was noise coming from one of the doors. Obviously, our rogue couriers had turned the abandoned building into their little hideout. Mister Black stopped before the door and checked his gun. I did the same, just in case. After all, this was my first ‘job’, so to speak, so I should learn as I went.

“Ready?” he asked. “Let’s get into character.”

My companion knocked the door a couple of times and somepony moved inside the apartment. We heard the lock click and the door opened. Mister Black took the initiative and entered the room, with me following closely.

“Hey colts!” he greeted. “How you bucks doin’?”

I moved to a corner and took a look at the flat; it was a living room with an adjoint kitchen in the far end. The living room had a table in the middle, where one of the couriers was standing, having breakfast. Another buck was lying on an old, battered couch, looking rather dozed. A third buck, the one that had opened the door, had slowly crept to a corner and was watching the scene with obvious signs of being rather nervous. When the pony on the couch noticed us, he made an attempt to get up but Mister Black stopped him with a wave of his hoof.

“Hey, keep chillin’.” He smiled and nodded as the buck returned to his original position.

“You know who we are?” he asked. “We’re associates of your employer, Dee Cleff. You DO remember our common associate and employer, don’t you?”

The pony at the table gulped, stressed. He was the one leading the team of couriers, no doubt.

“Now let me take a wild guess here,” Mister Black continued. He raised a hoof and scratched his moustache, letting everypony know he was thinking. Then, he pointed at the pony by the table. “You’re Butterbread, right?”

“Yeah.” Butterbread nodded.

“I thought so.” Mister Black smiled and walked to the table. I walked past them and towards the kitchen.

“You remember who I’m talking about, don’t you, Butterbread?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Butterbread nodded again and looked around nervously.

“Good.” Mister Black smiled again. His smile was the one of a dangerous beast ready to attack. “Looks like Blue and I caught you bucks having meal; sorry ‘bout that. What’cha havin’?”

“Jerky.” Butterbread muttered.

“Jerky!” Black’s smile broadened. “Ooh, I do love jerky. It’s one of my few weaknesses. What kind of jerky?”

“S-s-smoked jerky.” Butterbread stuttered.

“No, no, no. Where did you get it? The Diamonds, Smokey’s, Buck-in-a-box, where?”

“Uhm, Braeburn Jerky.” Butterbread showed the package.

“Braeburn Jerky! It’s that Appleloosa jerky joint.” Black chimed. “I heard they’ve got some tasty jerky, I

haven't had some myself. How is it?"

"G-good." Our victim wasn't enjoying Black's play.

"Mind if I try some of yours?" Black asked, and pointed to the jerky on the table before Butterbread. "This is yours here, right?"

Butterbread nodded, and Black grabbed some of the jerky with his muzzle. He gave it a big bite and tasted it with obvious delight.

"Mmm-hmm! This IS some tasty jerky!" he said, impressed. "Blue!" he called me. "You ever had some Braeburn Jerky?"

"No." I shook my head.

"Want a bite? It's real tasty!"

"No, I'm not hungry" I replied.

"Well, if you like jerky, give it a try sometime" Black said. "Me, I can't usually get some because I'm always out of town, working my ass out, but I do love the taste of some good jerky."

Black dropped the jerky and pointed at a paper glass on the table.

"What's there?" he asked.

"Apple cider" Butterbread replied.

"Apple cider, good! You mind if I have a bit of that tasty drink to wash this down?"

"Go right ahead."

Black took a long sip from the glass, almost emptying it, while he looked menacingly at Butterbread.

"Aaaah" he sighed. "Just magnificent."

Black left the glass on the table and walked towards the couch.

"You, flock of seagulls!" he said to the lying pony. "You know why we're here? Why don't you tell my buck Blue where you hid your shit at?"

"It's over there!" the pony in the corner, who had been nervously watching the whole scene, burst into a wail.

"I don't remember asking you a Celestia-damned thing!!!" Black turned his head and yelled in anger. "You were sayin'?"

"It's in the cupboard." The couch pony pointed towards the kitchen. I used my magic to open up the upper cupboard.

"N-no, th-the one by your hooves."

I opened up the lower cupboard and found an old looking leather case, closed and hidden behind some useless junk. I lifted it and laid it on the kitchen counter, then I turned the number lock until it opened. It was full with caps. No doubt the couriers got greedy, and no doubt Dee wanted them dead.

"We happy?" Black asked. "Blue! We happy?"

"Yeah, we happy." I smiled and closed the case.

"Look," Butterbread started talking nervously. "I didn't get your name. I got yours, Blue, right, but I-I never got yours..."

"My name's Bess," Black replied curtly, "and your ass ain't talking you out of this mess."

"N-no. I just want you to know how sorry we are that, that things got so fucked up with us and Miss Cleff. W-We got into this thing with the best intentions. Really, I never..."

As Butterbread was trying to talk his way out, Black had grasped his gun and aimed at the buck on the couch. Then, without saying a word, he shot him dead from point blank range. Butterbread flinched and gasped,

while Black gave him a smug look.

“Oh, I’m sorry... did I break your concentration?” he asked. “I didn’t mean to do that. Please, continue. You were saying something about ‘best intentions’?”

Butterbread was shaking and gasping, his eyes wide open and his muzzle turned into a rictus of pure fear.

“What’s the matter?” Black asked. “Oh, you were finished? Oh, well, in that case, I’ll carry on. Did you want to play smart on Dee Cleff?”

“What?” Butterbread almost cried.

Black flipped the table with a smack of his hoof.

“I’ve had enough of this shit! Don’t you what me!” he yelled.

“What? What?” Butterbread was shaking.

“I said don’t you what me, you motherfucker! Did you want to play smart on Dee Cleff?”

“Wh-wh-what?” Butterbread gasped for air, almost about to collapse from fear as Black lunged upon him.

“Say what again and I’ll fucking blow your brains off! Do you hear me?”

“Y-yes!” Butterbread cried.

“Then you know what I’m sayin’!”

“Yes!” Butterbread nodded hysterically.

“Did you want to play smart on Dee Cleff?”

“What?”

“All right, you’re about to cope with my patience, you scumbag! If you say what one more Celestia-damned time, imma nail your sorry flank! What was your fucking plan?” Black got his gun close to his muzzle empower his statement.

“W-w-we were g-g-going to s-s-split up the merchandise...” Butterbread cried, stuttering from fear.

“Go on!”

“Th-th-then we were going to s-s-sell it...”

“Do you think she’s a fool?”

“What?”

Black grabbed the gun and shot him in the foreleg, close to the kneecap. Butterbread flinched and toiled in pain.

“Do. You. Think. She. Is. A. Fool?”

“N-no!” Butterbread cried in pain and suffering. The wound in his foreleg was bleeding profusely.

“Then why you treatin’ to her like a damn fool, Butterbread?”

“N-no!”

“Yes you did, yes you did! You did, Butterbread! You tryin’ to play her like a fool, and Dee Cleff is smarter than all you potheads together. Now, now, Butterbread, don’t get us wrong. We are all civilized ponies, struggling to build civilization out of the ashes of the past. I’ll reveal a little secret to you. Dee Cleff despises violence, says it’s proper of raiders and crazy wastelanders. However, there is something that Dee Cleff despises even more, and that is disrespect. And you folks have been very, very disrespectful to Dee Cleff, and that is why she sent us here. Now, it’s nothing personal. It’s all a matter of business, a matter of doing things right. I don’t doubt that you will have learnt a valuable lesson about respect, but Dee Cleff’s orders were very clear. Gentlecolts, have a nice trip.”

“N-no! Wait!”

Black finished his little speech and lifted his gun, meaning that this was the time. I had witnessed the whole scene with a mixture of disbelief and discomfort, but as the minutes went by, a new feeling had grown inside me; a soft, warm, welcoming feeling. Something I had never felt before, that enveloped me and made me enjoy Black's play. I understood what was going on. I was feeling power, the power of ruling over these poor souls' lives and fates. The power of being able to dominate another pony's will. I saw myself reflected on the faces of Butterbread's couriers, and I remembered the pain I had been through.

Because power had been what had made my life disgraceful, or more properly; being on the wrong side of power. I had suffered all kinds of vexations that had led to my banishment, only for thinking for myself and defying the establishment. Rage bubbled in me as I remembered the humiliations I was put through, the suffering, the punishments... My soul claimed for revenge against Stable 188, and I was starting to see how to fulfil that demand.

*If you want the Stable, you will have to rule the city.* That was, more or less, what Brass Badge had told me the day of my banishment to Freedom Field. Power was my path to revenge, ergo survival wasn't my goal anymore. For the relevance it had, it was a quick decision. I would have to suffer, I would have to work hard, but I had a glorious purpose now. I would climb the ladder to the top, and I would stay there; I would rule New Pegasus and have my revenge, or I would die trying.

But now, let's return to the flat and the couriers, shall we? Black fired two shots at Butterbread, one into his chest and the second one straight to his head. I cocked the rifle and aimed at the pony in the corner, who had crouched and was shaking in fear. I looked through the iron sights and centered his head on them. Sorry, pal; life's like this.

**BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!**

It took me three shots to land a single bullet in the head of the poor sod, even if he was cornered and immobile. I would have to hold my breath when shooting to obtain better accuracy, and I knew my gripping spell was a bit sloppy. While I was taking down my target, Black checked the rest of the flat for more couriers. A shot fired in a nearby room let me know there was another buck hiding in the apartment.

Black came back while holstering his gun, a broad smile in his face. The zebra had proven to be a fearsome being and a master assassin, so he was a force to be reckoned with. Thank Celestia that we were both on the same side, for now at least. I stored my rifle in my belt and handed the case over to him.

"We did a nice job here, Blue." He whistled a tune. "Now let's return back to Miss Cleff before somepony comes snooping around."

Indeed, it would be best if we left this place. If Dee didn't want to attract attention, somepony catching us in the act wasn't the best case scenario, and we'd be in trouble; so we left the building quickly and trotted towards the Music School. When we got there, Black left the case on the counter, winked at the mare behind it, gave me a friendly pat in the back and left the place swiftly, a light, cheerful tune in his lips. What a mysterious fellow.

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Working for Metronome wasn't an orgy of blood and bullets, though. After my baptism of fire, I was given many petty assignments, most of them related to overseeing trade operations done by couriers or small-time dealers. Unlike the Buckmares or the Followers, the trading strategy for Dee's gang based itself upon the domination of the basic resources in Freedom Field, namely food and livestock. Our usual expeditions were composed by a "diplomatic" envoy of the Stringers, plus one or two goons providing protection. We would encounter the caravaners close to the city gates, offering them protection at a price they couldn't refuse. If they refused, well, that's what I was there for. The diplomat would warn the caravaners thoroughly about the dangers of venturing into Freedom Field with a full payload of goods and without a proper escort, and I would play my role giving them my meanest look and showing them what my rifle could do. I quickly learned about the convincing effect the gaping mouth of a freshly fired gun had on the mind of a caravaner. I understood that by doing this, Dee would maintain all the ins and outs of goods under control, ensuring that the traders made it safely to the highly watched Trader Plaza, and thus avoiding that rival gangs could

ambush the caravans.

Playing the grunt lost its fun rather quickly, to be honest. I never was a menacing presence, and even with a rifle aimed and ready to fire, I thought that wasn't my role at all. Playing the good cop, however, was something that fitted me much better. After a dozen of meetings close to the walls, I was able to mimic the gentle yet menacing voice and manners of the Stringer envoy. I just needed a chance to show that I could handle the issue myself, maybe with another goon to back me up; and that chance came with two caravans arrived at town almost at the same time. With a pinch of malice and my best acting, I was able to make the most grizzled of the guards squirm in fear; and that magnificent feel of power surged through my body once again. It was a job I could get used to.

The traders were very talkative about the dangers they faced on the road, and how the Wasteland treated unprepared adventurers, so in my spare time I headed to the outskirts and practiced as much as I could afford on the Stringers' meager pay. Even if I was healthier than the common wastelander buck, it dawned on me that I'd been relying on my magic. Magic was fickle, and I might someday find myself having ran out of it in the most crucial of moments. Practice became a workout as I began to mimic an aiming posture that I'd seen an earth pony use to handle a similar rifle. Empty bottles, cans and debris were my target practice, and I emptied magazine after magazine against my foes; becoming a lot more accurate over time.

At first, it would take me several shots to hit the target, as I had to control the recoil of the rifle as well as my own clumsy gripping spell. The rifle was precise, indeed, but I wasn't strong enough to handle it properly. It would either fall to the side or jump like crazy, and I earned myself some strong bucks in my face from its wooden hilt. Speaking of which, I should describe my rifle properly, since it became one of my most trustworthy companions.

The weapon was a lever-action repeater rifle, with a ten-round magazine of magnum bullets, crafted with care and profusely decorated. Streams of gold drew branches and leaves along the silvery gray cannon, and the hilt was a piece of tasteful woodwork; a chunk of mahogany turned into a fully decorated wedge. The thing is, the gun and I learned to get together rather nicely, and after some weeks of heavy training; I could hit a tin can from a very long distance. Metronome was right: with the proper management, that rifle was a formidable weapon, and it needed a proper name. I found that the hilt had a lily engraved in the wood, so I decided to call the rifle "Lead Lily", which I found rather catchy to be a nickname for a gun.

My mind worked as well, since I hadn't forgotten my initial goal of ending the malevolent scheme of Saddle and Goldie. The motives that drove me had changed, though. What at first had been an honest attempt to provide a better life for the ponies of Freedom Field was now nothing more than a personal revenge. I wanted to return each and every blow to the two ponies that had ordered my torture and death. It was a simple matter of respect, as I had learned from Metronome. I would have them respect me, no matter the cost; and I would show them they had no power over me.

I had been brewing a plan night after night. Since the Buckmares and the Followers were continuously trying to press an alliance with the Coilites, maybe the easiest way of dealing them a good blow was to hook up the Coilites to the Stringers, since after all, their supremacy depended on establishing a three-on-one scenario. I was willing to bet that the Coilites didn't want to join that Triple Entente because they feared a possible negative outcome. Their behaviour was clearly isolationist, almost everypony in Freedom Field knew it. Live and let live, as long as we can do our gun trading.

However, an alliance with the Buckmares and the Followers would turn their world upside down. If they lost the war, apart from the obvious losses of the battle, the Stringers would surely cut their business short, forcing them to dissolve or be assimilated. If they won, they had no guarantees of how the relationship between the three would go. Buckmare was a power-hungry bastard, that was also common knowledge, and there was no way of telling if Goldie would be able of keeping him on a short leash. There was no guarantee of a durable peace after the war if Buckmare won, and that was bad for business.

If the Stringers were able to form an alliance with the Coilites, or at least guarantee their non-involvement in a potential war, the chances of a positive outcome for the Buckmare-Follower alliance were very slim. With that situation settled, there would be great possibilities of forcing a negotiation to end up the drug scam. The

plan was convoluted and relied on many assumptions, but I had a hunch; I had the feeling that it could succeed.

First, however, I needed to do a bit of field investigation, and that would have to take me to the Tesla Bar.

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The Tesla Bar was a very serious place, with a considerable security. To begin with, a large iron-armored stallion stood guard at the door with a massive gun system that fell at both sides of his body. The two cannon nozzles glowed with a sickening green light, ready to fire at any menace. He had been looking at me ever since I came close, and blocked me when I tried to enter the Tesla Bar.

“What is your business here?” he asked curtly; letting me know I’d better not mess with him if I didn’t want to be obliterated by whatever those guns fired.

“Business? I’m just here to deliver a message to the pony in charge. No bad intentions, honest.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’m going to have to frisk you for hidden guns. Boss’s orders.”

“Hidden guns? I’m not hiding anything, pal. My rifle is clearly on sight. Here, have it.” I left Lead Lily on the floor. “Frisk me if you want, you won’t find anything else. Unless what you want is something different.”

“Don’t play fancy on me, mate. Legs wide open!”

I shrugged and nodded, then he took a step towards me and frisked me. He could have forgotten about it and I wouldn’t have tricked him, since I wasn’t hiding anything. Anyway, it wasn’t that much of a hassle, and I had made my way into the Tesla Bar.

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Ugly, the place was ugly. Metal gray walls, grating fences separating parts of the Bar, and a single, massive counter full of all the possible kinds of guns and ordnance were the only thing inside the building. To call this place a Bar was a huge lie, or at least it was now. I could manage to imagine a bar in the room in which I was standing, but now it was nothing more than a gun and ammo dealership. The shelves, now toppling with guns and ammo packs could have been used to store glasses or bottles. The now empty room could have had some tables lying around; but at the time, everything was laid to allow a standoff within the walls of the building, giving the pony behind the counter a vantage point.

Such vantage point was controlled by two ponies, an unicorn mare and an earth pony stallion. The mare wore a sharp, metal-blue colored dress that made her look fairly attractive. Her gray mane fell equally to both sides of her head, and her garment included a detail close to the flanks, something that looked like a gray orb surrounded by bluish thunder. The stallion beside her was clearly her bodyguard, a big black hulk clad in iron riveted armor with a nuke cloud on his flank. His mane, also pitch black, was braided into small dreadlocks.

“Welcome to the Tesla Bar,” the mare said without much emotion, “what can I do for you?”

“Maybe we can talk about some business strategy.” I gave her a cold look, trying to pay little attention to the hulk beside her.

“Business strategy? Explain yourself.” The Coilite mare gave me a cold glare, as if she was judging whether she should listen to me or kick me out.

“Is he of trust?” I asked, pointing to the stallion.

“LaRoche is like a brother to me. Whatever you have to tell me you can tell him.”

“Okay.” I nodded, and smiled politely at LaRoche, since I didn’t want to piss him off too much. “I’ll put my cards on the table here. I’m an external working for the Stringers, and I’m running a little investigation by myself. I know of the interest the Buckmares and the Followers have on bringing you to their side, and I wanted to hear what you have to say.”

“Give me a good reason to reveal that information to you.”

“What do you lose? I’m a nuisance for Buckmare and the Followers. They all want me dead, so I always

have to look to both sides of the street to see if there is somepony ready to blow my brains out. The only faction I can give the information to are the Stringers, and I told you in the first place that I work for them.”

“Do they want to know about it? ‘Cause if they do, they could have sent one of their goons instead of a freelancer.”

“Think on the image. If a Stringer goon gets caught around your place, that would stir things up pretty much. Me? I’m nothing but a small-time help, paid by the hour. Any of these days, the Stringers will dump me as well; so seeing me walk in and out of your joint won’t be a diplomatic issue.”

The Coilite mare looked at me eye to eye, as if she was trying to read the ideas in my brain. She mumbled something as she meditated about my words; then, she nodded and coughed.

“Okay, I’ll speak with you. However, I’m going to send an envoy to the Stringers, and if I learn you’re trying to fool me, I’ll have you wiped out; understood?”

“Yeah. No fuss.”

“Good. Listen closely, ‘cause I ain’t repeating it. Yes, I had a meeting with Saddle Buckmare about a week ago; and yes, he spoke to me about a big, bad plan to take Dee Cleff and her gang out of the picture. However, we turned it down. Why? Simple, we don’t want to involve in a conflict like that. Our earnings rose amazingly when peace was achieved, simply because our clients wouldn’t die right after crossing the door. Therefore, a war would be terrible for us.”

“I understand, although I think that a war isn’t something you can avoid from happening; and if it happens, you’d have to choose sides. After all, you’re a force to be reckoned with, even if you try to stay aside.”

“Where are you going to?”

“Well, that’s the reason of my investigation. I want to know what do you want from the Stringers in order to either sign an alliance or a non-involvement agreement, should the conflict start.”

“What makes you think we’d do that?”

“You just dumped the Buckmare offer, and Saddle doesn’t seem to be the kind of buck that takes such decisions easily. I’m pretty sure that he’ll back up his next offer with thirty heavily armed goons. Dee, instead, is a reasonable mare. She likes to behave politely and do things in a diplomatic manner. Knowing that, I was here to take note of your demands in order to position yourself beside her.”

The Coilite and LaRoche looked at each other and whispered something I didn’t manage to hear. There was some high-level strategy going on between these two, and I innerly smiled as I knew my words had carved into their minds. They hadn’t dumped me yet, so I knew that they took my proposal into account.

“Well…” the mare said. “Your offer is interesting. I suppose that, if we took the Buckmares out of the picture, we could ask for their properties and their monopolies.”

“You know that Dee is strongly against drug dealing, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, and I don’t like it either, because dealing with junkies is not a pleasant job. Take the drugs out of the picture, leave them to the petty dealers. I meant guns and booze; we want those. The Stringers can keep the fort and the wounded.”

“Okay. Noted.”

“And then we’d like a non-aggression treaty. Once the rest are gone, how can we assure that the Stringers won’t attack us? After all, they’re far more powerful than us.”

“That is a very reasonable demand.” I smiled. “Anything else?”

“No, not really. Those are our demands, in case Dee is interested.”

“Good, good; I’ll let them know. Pleasure doing business with you.”

I started to back away, trying not to lose eye contact with LaRoche. As soon as I reached the door, I swiftly turned around and opened it, leaving the building as quickly as possible. With such demands under my

power, this one would have to be a top class negotiation if I wanted to drive my plan forward.

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Metronome was tuning up her cello when I entered the concert hall. She raised her head from the instrument and gave me an amused glare through her glasses. Then, a smirk cracked her face of concentration and she returned to her cello.

“So, you’ve been messing around with information, haven’t you?” She didn’t even look at me.

“How do you know?” That one caught me off guard.

“I’ve been speaking for some time with a Coilite envoy, so I know about your ups and downs.”

“Riiiiiiight.” I felt like I was playing to another pony’s rules, and that didn’t make me feel good. “Well, what do you say?”

“Nothing, you tell me.” She finally looked at me, cold as ice.

“Well, I’ve been scouting the Coilites; and I’ve come to the impression that the time is ripe for a well-placed coup.”

“Carry on.” She kept acting cold, but I could notice a hint of interest in her words.

“The Coilites have an open mind towards an alliance with us, if we give in to their demands.”

“What demands?”

“Monopoly over guns and booze after the war is over and a non-aggression pact between us, that is all.”

“You know what?” she asked, looking rather amused. “I like your attitude, but that plan is a no-go.”

“Why?” I felt stupid, played, and angry at Metronome. I had gone into some serious risks to obtain that information and I didn’t want to be shooed like that. “What is wrong with all the information I’ve given you?”

“Farsight, listen to me. I really appreciate your work, you’ve shown great determination to enter the Coilites’ lair, identify yourself and start asking tough questions. The information you’ve brought us is very interesting, as it’s the first time we’ve got the demands of the Coilites for an alliance.”

“But...” I already was anticipating her speech.

“But you are really fucking nuts.” Her amused face turned into a stone-cold glare. “You really must be out of your Luna-damned mind to think that we’re going to flush a hard-worked peace down the drain because of some convoluted plan of an external?”

I felt like beaten down to a pulp. All the momentum I had been picking, all the morale I had obtained from the meeting with the Coilites and the good results of it vanished in the blink of an eye.

“Don’t get me wrong.” Her face was still cold, but her tone had become warmer, more welcoming. “I can appreciate your talent. You SEE, hence your name. You can think deeper and faster than anypony around, and your reasoning has been correct so far. You can see through ponies, read them like books. I believe you will really make it big in this business, if you take the right decisions.”

Now she was just being kind in order to discourage me from arguing with her. She just wanted me to leave with a silent nod and the feeling that I was appreciated in the gang. However, I knew it wasn’t, because I knew all she had told me was just a kind lie, a piece of candy to keep me happy while she got away with it. Well, too bad for you, Metronome, because I’m not the average goon you can distract with some nice words.

“Metronome,” I said sternly, “I want to discuss my plan directly with Miss Cleff.”

I was very calm when I said this last thing, but my words rumbled like thunder in the Music Hall. Metronome flinched at my mention of her boss, and her cold glare turned into a gaze of pure hate. Obviously, she felt she was being undermined, like she was being moved aside by me, as I tried to make my way up towards Dee. Her muzzle curled in disgust as I stood there, relaxed, looking at her eye to eye. I felt good watching her

doubt, it was that warm feeling once again. With only a sentence, I had gained power over her. I was no more a common goon or an external, instead, I had become something different; something that could outsmart her.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She tried to disguise a stutter with a crackling laugh. “What makes you think Dee will have a different opinion?”

“I’m not saying that.” I was feeling really, really calm. Even if I knew I was playing with fire, I wasn’t even worried. “In fact, I also do think that the most probable outcome will be the same. However, I don’t think there is a reason that explains why I shouldn’t discuss this personally with her. Now, Metronome, I respect you; I respect your work as Miss Cleff’s second in command, and I’d like you to be there when I talk with your boss about my plan. I want you to give your opinion as well... I don’t want to undermine you, honest. There is a driving force for this plan, and it’s no different than freeing this town from the junkies.”

“Oh, really? Is it?” Metronome was trying to act cold, but I could see the interest in her eyes. She was having a hard time deciding whether to listen to me or to dump me.

“It is. I’m aware of the existence of a joint course of action between the Followers of the Shy and the Buckmare drug dealers. The latter ones flood the city with drugs while the former ones offer rehabilitation for a price. It has been working like that for a while, which is providing your foes with a rather considerable amount of caps.”

“Stop right there... You’re telling me those two gangs are actually conspiring together? Have you got any proof?”

“Not really. I was being tortured because I was caught spying on them, so you’ll have to believe my words.”

“I can’t. Still, it’s not the first time we hear the rumor. Maybe, and only maybe, I can hook you up with Dee Cleff one of these days. However, you’ll have to do something to prove your total allegiance to the gang.”

“Tell me.” Another errand, that was what my life was all about. This time there was a good reason to get moving, though.

“It’s not that easy, I’m warning you from now on. If those two are really gearing up for war, we need to do something about it, and both Miss Cleff and I think that the key to strengthen our domination over Freedom Field is to control the basic resources, mainly water. Right now, we obtain all our water from a cistern out northeast from town, but no pony has actual control over it. If we could get ourselves a Water Talisman, we would have the power to cut the water supply to those who opposed us.”

“That is cunning.” I smiled, and she smiled back at the compliment. “How am I supposed to obtain a Water Talisman, though? I would need to find a Stable from which I could scavenge it. Won’t you happen to know about one?”

“No, I’m sorry. Try with the Traders... After all, those are the ones that really hear the news from the Wasteland.”

“Good.” I nodded. “So, once I bring you a Water Talisman, you’ll set up a meeting with Dee, right?”

“Just like that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a lesson to give.”

I turned around and left the room while a young colt dragged a bass case into the Music Hall. Once again, Freedom Field’s attitude towards music surprised me.

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I trotted my way towards Trader Plaza with my head up in the clouds. The deal I had just signed with Metronome was an actual fool’s errand. Where on this world was I supposed to find a working Water Talisman? I knew there had to be two of them in Stable 188, but there was no way I could get back into New Pegasus, then into the Stable, get a Talisman and leave. That was just out of the question. Therefore, I would have to rely on finding an abandoned Stable.

To do so, however, there were two ways of tackling the problem. The first one, which was by the way the most aggressive and dangerous one, was just grabbing some supplies and leaving for the Wasteland. Once out

on the open, I would start roaming around, looking for a Stable gate. It was plain and simple madness. The second one, far more conservative, was to wait until some crazy rumor about a new found Stable came through. This solution was wiser but had few chances of giving me a Talisman.

While I was meditating around all these issues, I had walked straight into Trader Plaza, and I found myself in the middle of the usual chaos of small plywood stands and sheet metal shacks. Any place was as good as the rest to start asking around, but I decided to head out to meet somepony I already knew and that I already missed.

“Oh, sweet Celestia! Farsight!” Sunberry Grass hugged me tightly. “Where have you been?”

“Well... I’ve faced some changes in my life.” I smiled at her and freed myself from her hug. “Which means I won’t be working as a trader anymore.”

“You got into the gangs, didn’t you?”

“Not willingly. I was forced to join one.”

“That’s too bad. I liked to have you beside me, you were a good companion.”

I smiled at her compliment and shrugged. I could keep chatting all day long, but there were matters I had to talk about with Sunberry.

“Sunberry, you speak with caravaneers, don’t you?”

“Almost everyday, yes. Why do you ask?”

“Have you ever heard about any abandoned Stables around? I need to retrieve something from one.”

“No, I’m sorry. Ask around, but rumours run quickly out here... If somepony knew about a new Stable, then everypony would be speaking about it already. What is it you need to find?”

“A Water Talisman.”

“Oh, a Water Talisman. It’s one of those magical gemstones that produces clean water, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is. My employers want to ensure water supply for Freedom Field.”

“I wish you could find two, Farsight. Have you heard about the Communal Farms the NER is developing out in the Wasteland?”

“Communal Farms?”

“Yes! It seems the NER is planning to set up farms all around Neighvada once they get here. Apparently they’ve already done that in other parts of the Wasteland and things are going really good. And I heard in the radio yesterday that the Ambassador spoke about starting similar farms around New Pegasus.”

“Which would help produce a great amount of food, apart from giving jobs to many.”

“Yes!! Don’t you think it’s a great idea?” Sunberry squeed. “The only problem is that they need abundant clean water, and as Neighvada is a Luna-damned desert... That’s why I said that it would be great if you found two Talismans. Because you aren’t even thinking on giving the one you find to the NER, are you?”

Sunberry looked at me with a sad face, clearly asking me to find a Talisman for the New Equestrian Republic’s farming project. I felt confused, because although my mind told me to forget about Sunberry and the NER, and to find the Talisman for Metronome, so I could speak to Dee and try to drive my plan forward; my heart wanted me to do what my Trader friend told me. By giving the Talisman to the Republic, I would be providing a better future to a lot of ponies in Neighvada, whereas, by giving it to Metronome, I’d be using the Talisman as a weapon, giving the Stringers the possibility of restricting water supply to the population of Freedom Field.

A voice inside me posed a clear question. What would the Light Bringer do? The Light Bringer... The book I had read while recovering came back to haunt me. The tale of a common hero, the story of a normal Stable Pony, just like me, who had given it all for her friends, and ultimately, for everypony. She would have given the Talisman to the Republic, no doubt.

However, I knew I was no Light Bringer. I was no hero; in fact, I didn't believe in heroes. All my experience had taught me that we were all ponies, with our lights and shadows, with our ups and downs. Heroes only worked in fiction, whereas in reality it was more of a every pony for himself situation, and I had to take care of myself.

"Sorry, Sunberry." I lowered my head because I couldn't look her in the eyes. "I can't give it to the NER."

"I see..."

I turned around and left hastily. Even if my decision was final and I knew I was doing what was best for me, I couldn't help a feeling of guilt. I realized that, if I wanted to climb the ladder, the first foe I would have to defeat would be no other than myself.

#

Note: Reputation Change

Stringers: Accepted. Even if you're not part of their gang, the members of this organization welcome you and your ideas, as long as you don't get too cocky.

## ***Chapter 4: Dust In The Wind***

*“Good morning to all of you listening to New Pegasus Radio, I’m your host, Mister New Pegasus, bringing you all the news in the buzzing city of New Pegasus; as well as the sweetest tunes across the Wasteland. I woke up to find it was actually raining! When was the last time it rained in New Pegasus? Since I was a young colt, everything in this area has been dry and dusty. The books speak of a time when the pegasi took care of the weather. Where are they now? Who knows. Anyway, it seems today will be a rainy day, so come out and enjoy the water, everypony. It’s rad-free!*”

*The city has woken up with some terrible news indeed. The heir to the Ferratura family, young colt Sandmound Ferratura, was found dead in a gutter close to his family’s casino hotel, The Clops. NPPD officer Brass Badge has been set in charge of the investigation and has refused to make any kind of statement in order to keep the safety of the research. However, many authorized voices of the entourage of the Ferraturas speak of a mob crime, most probably a score being settled. It’s sad to see that the relative peace New Pegasus was enjoying is crumbling down since the reopening of the Platinum Horseshoe. This humble announcer hopes, for the good of everypony, that things return back to normal; and that the culprit of this horrible crime is found and given fair trial.*

*On to international... if you can call it so, politics. After her faux-pas of some days ago, Ambassador Merry Fields of the NER has published an official manifesto with the true intentions of the Republican Council. According to this document, the NER wishes to gain control of the entirety of the Wasteland, bringing the light of law and civilization back to where it was lost. For the case of New Pegasus, the Republic devises a Statute of Independence according to which the New Pegasus City Board will be the fully competent authority inside the city walls, leaving the laws outside to the Republic. However, this still leaves some fields of conflict. First, what happens if the City Board and the NER clash about a certain law? And secondly, it’s still not clear what will happen to the township of Freedom Field. Strictly speaking, it’s not part of New Pegasus, but it’s not the open Wasteland either.*

*Anyway, this is still far from becoming true. There are no signs of NER armies closing in to our city, and the Equestrian Wasteland is still a free place. Dear listeners, what do you say if I play some music to you while we wait for things to unfold? Here’s something to make you move those flanks, the magic of Vinyl Scratch!”*

It was a fool’s errand.

Every single minute I kept thinking that, over and over again. Metronome had tricked me to accept a deal that I had no way of fulfilling. All the research I had been able to do had told me almost nothing about Stables in Neighvada. At first, I took my task with high spirits, actively speaking with traders, caravaners or Wasteland roamers that came to Freedom Field to rest and spend some caps. Every single time, the answer I received was the same: a polite smile, a shake of the head and some words of apology.

I was starting to feel angrier and angrier, but I couldn’t blame anypony but myself for having taken such a bad decision. I should have been smarter, damn it! I should have seen that Metronome’s true intention was to avoid me from talking with her boss. Yes, there were good reasons to want to recover a Water Talisman, no doubt about that. With the water supply of Freedom Field coming from a Water Talisman located inside the city walls instead of from a cistern in no pony’s land, the faction who controlled the Talisman would control the flow of water into town; and with the water in the Stringers’ hooves, the rest of the gangs would have no other choice than to fold to their demands.

However, controlling the water wasn’t a key factor to control the city. If that had been the case, Metronome would have set many of her goons to find a Stable. Instead, it was only me, and by myself, without the help of anypony else, who was desperately trying to pick up the slightest rumor about any finding.

Besides, this quest had cost me much already. Sunberry Grass didn’t speak to me anymore, and that was painful. It’s not that I loved her or anything like that, but I felt her appreciation towards me, and I remember her as the first pony that had shown genuine interest in myself. Because of that, having lost that friendship

with her was painful. Every time we met in Trader Plaza, she would just look away with a sad face. I had let her down.

However, I was trying to sweep that pain off my mind. There was no turning back time, so there was no room for crying over spilt milk. Choices had been made, and now was the time to act consequently, no matter how hard it was. I had learned that this was a harsh world, and that I had to take care for myself, and myself only. The NER would have to take care of itself.

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Days went by and still, there was no trace of the lost Stables. I had been constantly looking for information, questioning the traders with less and less politeness, hacking through any network I could get close to in order to find anything, but all was pointless. There were records of abandoned Stables, but most of them were decades old, and I had been able to find newer entries speaking about what the scavengers had found in them. Of course, all Water Talismans had been found and sold. Stable 145, found and scavenged; Stable 164, found and looted; Stable 197, found and scavenged; Stable 122, inaccessible.

In the meantime, Metronome kept giving me petty tasks to fulfil. Escorting a caravan out of town, picking up potted goons from the bars, bringing peace to a rant between two rival traders... Nothing too fancy, just a meager pay and then back into the endless search of the lost Stable. Sometimes I felt like I was trapped in an endless loop I couldn't get out of.

That day, however, proved to be different. I had been assigned to escort a caravaneer around town, a grizzled ochre earth pony with a face full of scars. I had picked him up at the main gate and driven him around town to the Trader Plaza. He was delivering a full stock of Pre-War clothing in quite a good shape, from which he expected to obtain a nice amount of caps. While he was bartering around with other traders and casual bystanders, I had used that time to walk around asking the same question. Once again, no luck.

Usually, the typical behaviour of caravaneers was simple. Since their success relied on being able to deliver as many goods as possible, they tended to arrive, sell, and leave without having a minute of rest. This one, however, had had a good day of business so he decided to indulge himself for the night and leave the next morning, so my working hours would have to extend. I mumbled a silent curse, since I wasn't going to get paid any extra caps for watching over the happy salespony for the whole night.

We had lunch at a small shack that sold turnip stew. I insisted on going to Braeburn Jerky to have real food, not a smoking, tasteless gruel; but since he was the one paying, he had the privilege of choosing. With caps in his pouch and food in his stomach, he became quite talkative. He told me that the area around New Pegasus was still far from explored, as many buildings remained without having been scavenged or destroyed. The bad thing about exploring the open Wasteland was that, once you stepped out of the usual trails, there were many dangers looming about.

Before I could ask him about which dangers he talked about, he gulped the rest of the stew and left the place. I hurried to follow him, but I got the feeling that this caravaneer knew quite a lot of things... maybe he even knew about a Stable. I would have to keep close and try to question him. If things got rough between him and me, well, I could live without the pay for this job.

My protégé left the main streets and started walking deeper and deeper into the dark alleys of Freedom Field. This dead-end gutters surrounded by abandoned buildings were a place to keep away from with daylight, not to speak at night. When I asked him about why he was leaving the safe areas, he told me he had hired a couple of hookers for the night, and that he wanted to bang them out in the open. What an odd fellow... maybe the many years out in the open ended up turning anypony into something like the caravaneer?

We reached our destination in a narrow alley close to the city wall. Two young mares were waiting for us, almost naked. I noticed they were almost fillies, what made me wince in disgust. The caravaneer, however, was licking his lips in delight.

"C'mon, son!" he told me. "Let's go 'ave some fun. Y'take the one on the left, I'll take the one on the right."

"Sorry, sir." I shook my head. "I'm here to provide security, and I can't provide any security if I have my head stuck in a mare's flank."

“What’s wrong, son? You’re more into bucks or somethin’?”

“No, sir. Don’t worry about me, go have some fun.”

“Ave it your way.”

The caravaner trotted up to the mares, who welcomed him with caresses and soft kisses. I decided not to look, since the moans of pleasure coming from the end of the alley were starting to get me... uncomfortable. I was starting to grow a fifth hoof, and that wasn’t what I really wanted at the moment.

Suddenly, apart from the chorus of moans and sighs from the caravaner and the two hookers, another sound caught my attention. It was very subtle at the beginning, but it was starting to grow in intensity; but after a minute I recognized it was the sound of hoofsteps. It was a trap!

Come to think of it, it wasn’t too surprising. Wealthy caravaner comes around boasting about the great catch of the day and hires two hookers to have a threesome in a back alley. It was only a matter of time that the hookers or their pimps took the risk of setting up a trap to have him robbed. The only thing they hadn’t counted on was me; or maybe they had, and I was in for a nasty surprise.

I decided to crouch behind a dumpster in one of the sides of the alley and readied my trusted Lead Lily. This would be the first real gunfight I was going to be involved in, since our retaliation against the rogue couriers in their place hadn’t been much of a gunfight; it had been an execution, nothing more and nothing less.

The hoofsteps were getting closer, so I cocked my rifle and activated the E.F.S. Two incoming points, not yet hostile. They didn’t count on me, it seems, because if they did, they would probably have brought more muscle and they’d be on guard already. These two, however, seemed to be strolling around the park. Suddenly they stopped and the dots turned red... now they were hostile.

“Okay, fella.” A voice that sounded like a battered radio spoke. “Give us all your money!”

“Wha-?” I looked at the caravaner. He was still on top of one of the mares, but his face showed no pleasure. Instead, he looked puzzled.

“Didn’t you hear me? Your caps!”

The caravaner didn’t move anymore, and the two hookers were looking at each other in true fear. It seems they weren’t counting on that either. I saw the two dots get closer as the two muggers walked towards the three victims. One second later, they had overcome my position and had walked past me without even looking behind the dumpster. It was clear they weren’t expecting anypony else in the meeting... too bad for them. I quickly got up and aimed Lead Lily at the closest pony, ready to see if my training had paid off. I took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

The Magnum round of the rifle punched a big hole in the first thug’s face, spraying the second one with blood and brains. It had been a clean shot from just a couple of meters away, so there wasn’t much merit to it. The second thug, caught totally off guard, turned around aiming a revolver towards me. His armor, even if stained with blood, carried a symbol I quickly recognized: the head of a mare, meaning these were Buckmare thugs.

“You!” The second goon had recognized me. Metronome was right saying that I was a wanted pony.

I should have shot without thinking twice, but I didn’t. Instead, I smirked and played fancy; moving in circles around him, while he tried to take aim. If I moved fast enough, he wouldn’t be able to get a clear shot. The only problem was that I couldn’t aim while moving either. Thus, instead of having ended the confrontation in a quick and easy way, I had driven myself into a stalemate. For being a smart pony, I could be a dumbass sometimes.

**BANG!**

A bullet whizzed close to my ears, stopping me dead in my tracks. One instant earlier, and that bullet would have punched a hole in my head. Playtime was over, so I quickly aimed at the Buckmare goon’s head and

shot.

**BLAM!**

The shot went wide, and instead of blowing my foe's brain, the bullet wounded the goon in the face, sending him to the floor with half of his muzzle turned into reddish mincemeat. He started wailing in pain and rolling over. I stepped close and aimed at his head, took a deep breath and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

With the echoes of the shot, the alley returned to silence. Even if that pony had tried to kill me, he didn't deserve to go down in agony, so I took him out of his suffering. I started reloading Lead Lily, and while I was doing that, I realized what had just happened. I looked around to see two dead bodies forming puddles of blood in the floor, one with two holes in his head, the first the size of a cap, the second the size of an apple; another one with half his face torn apart. Reality hit me like a sledgehammer. I had killed two ponies, all by myself. I felt the world tumble and I had to open my legs not to fall to the side.

I had already seen death eye to eye in the gunfight with the couriers. I had already shot one pony down, but I was following orders. This time I had acted on my own, and I had ended two lives almost in the blink of an eye. Raising above the shock, my mind started clicking once again. Why was I feeling bad? Wasn't I suppose to provide security to a pony? And wasn't that pony being mugged at the moment? And most importantly, weren't the muggers part of one of the gangs I wanted to take down? Hadn't I put my life in the line?

The answer to all these questions was positive. I was acting according to my assignment, I had delivered a blow to those who almost killed me, and I had killed to avoid being killed myself. Therefore, I should shake off these feelings of guilt. In a world where a step in the wrong direction could have you shot down mercilessly, feeling bad for having shot an armed pony down was just nonsense.

Meanwhile, as I sunk in deep meditation about my actions, the caravaner had returned to action and was already on top of one of the hookers. I paid him little attention and searched through the bodies of the dead thugs, looking for any orders that could have sent them here. I found some caps, a couple of magical bandages and some bullets for my rifle, but there was no trace of any document. Maybe they had acted on their own free will after all. Then I headed to the caravaner. He had taken enough risks, and I was willing to drag him out of town, since I wasn't going to get into another gunfight because of him. Something in his saddlebags caught my attention as I was going to end up his party: it was a blue and yellow canister, like the ones the workers in the Stable used to carry around with their fresh water. I remembered mine, probably still lying in the drawer of my office. It was like the one I saw in the saddlebag, blue and yellow with a big 188 printed on one of the sides. I lifted the one in the caravaner's bag to take a better look at it, and to my surprise, the number on the canister was 173. I quickly took a look at my PipBuck, where I had stored all the information about the existing Stables, and the Stable 173 was nowhere to be found. I smiled, my heart throbbing with glee. I had found the lost Stable, now I just needed to know where it was, and I knew who was going to tell me.

"Alright, pal. End of the party!" I said smugly.

"What?"

"I said it's over." I looked at the hookers with a cold glare. "You two, get lost."

I floated Lead Lily close to me just in case, but the two mares quickly got the message and left in a gallop. The caravaner was looking at me with anger in his face and his pants still on the ground.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, you idiot?" he yelled.

"My job didn't involve keeping you safe while you were having a menage a trois. I could have forgotten about you and let those two scumbags punch some holes in your sorry hide. However, I didn't, but I'm not getting paid for it. So you might as well give me that little extra."

"I ain't paying you, you lousy fuck!"

"Good, because I want no caps. I want information." I kicked the canister towards him. "Where's Stable

173?"

"What?" the caravaner laughed. "If you think I'm telling you that, you're a dumb foal."

"Maybe," I said calmly while cocking my rifle, "but I'm a dumb foal with a gun. I can shoot you and say you were attacked by muggers in a dark alley."

"Idiot, if you kill me you will never know where the Stable is!"

"Who said I was going to kill you?" I smirked and lowered the rifle, aiming right between his hindlegs. "Tell me where the Stable is, or you won't have any more fun."

"N-no." He kept trying to act strong, but I was in control now. His little friend was his weak spot.

**BLAM!**

The caravaner wailed in anguish, even if the bullet went deliberately low. I hadn't planned to blow his dick off in the first shot, since I wanted him to squirm in fear. A sound of flowing water filled the air, and I noticed he had lost control of his sphincter. He was broken.

"That was a warning shot." I gave him my coldest, sternest look. "The next one won't miss. Give me the coordinates to the Stable, or else."

He didn't even mutter a reply. He just nodded and handed me a piece of paper with a makeshift map of the area. I compared it to the area map of my PipBuck and established a marker in the place where the Stable should be; hoping that the place hadn't been raided by the time I got there.

"Now get lost!" I said to the caravaner. "If I find that the Stable has been scavenged or if I end up in a trap, I swear to Celestia that I'll find you and I'll kill you."

The trembling sod nodded and grabbed his bags, then he left in a hasty gallop. I waited until I couldn't hear his hooves running, then I let out a scream of pure joy. Things were finally starting to move forward.

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The day after I found the lost Stable I headed to the Trader Plaza to look for some good equipment. Inside the city walls, a suit was enough to walk around, since the chances of being attacked were very small, provided you stayed in the right places. Outside, however, that very suit would be useful against the claws of any wild beast, not to speak about the Raiders, who would simply shoot on sight, or so they said.

I had to spend almost all my caps to get myself equipped properly. Armors were expensive, as long as you wanted to buy something that wouldn't fall apart with the first hit. Most of them were made out of leather or rubber, but some traders sold metal combat armors made out of pre-War scraps. However, I couldn't afford any of those. Instead, I chose a black leather armor with saddlebags; and I tried it on me.

It was pretty heavy, but once I latched everything together, it turned out to be quite comfortable, and it felt pretty safe as well. Also, the saddlebags allowed me to carry many more things than the pockets of the suit. Come to think of it, the armor was almost as comfortable as a Stable jumpsuit, and it would give me a less singular look than a suit, so I would blend in better with the ponies of the Wasteland. In a few words, it was a perfect fit.

Then, I used the rest of my caps to buy ammunition and supplies, such as food and bandages. The medical apparel was a monopoly of the Followers, so that was a no-go for me, but I managed to barter some medical bandages from a caravaner. He charged me an insane lot of caps for the bandages, as they were part of his private stack, but I couldn't risk going out on the open without some medical aid on me, so I paid.

Equipped and eager, I left Trader Plaza. The black cloud ceiling looked even darker when I trod the main Avenue of Freedom Field heading for the gates. Finally, I was going to enter the Equestrian Wasteland looking for the Talisman Metronome had asked me to find. The gates opened and I crossed them, then they closed behind me. Things were about to get real.

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The Wasteland was unforgiving and utterly deadly, but there was a natural elegance and charm to it. When I

first saw the world that stretched beyond the City, I found myself staring at the horizon, set ablaze by the red sand of the Neighvada Desert. The crags and hills that popped out from behind the crumbling remains of what had been left outside the walls showed all the range of colours from golden yellow to blood red; and the thin line of horizon beneath the thick clouds shone with a transition from sky blue to bright pink.

There was something more. The silence was simply breathtaking; and I could hear the wind roar from the mountains up north as it passed by me, a scorching breeze from the desert around New Pegasus. Inside the city there was always some noise, either the sound of a conversation, somepony laughing and stomping, the music from a radio or the humming of some electronic device. Out here, it all went mute, allowing to hear the wind whistle, the raindrops (which had started falling not too long ago) tapping against the floor, the rustling of dry grass... Even if it all implied death and destruction, it was just beautiful.

Another difference was subtler, since I was the only pony that could perceive it; and it was the silence my Eyes-Forward Sparkle had sunken into. In Freedom Field, the E.F.S. was constantly reporting close activity, although it was mostly neutral or friendly. Out in the open, there was nothing apart from the faint arrow pointing towards my marker; the abandoned Stable the caravaneer had pointed me towards, and I wanted me to search. Beside that, nothing at all; just me in the middle of nowhere.

All that beauty was deceitful, though, as it hid countless dangers for the untrained traveller. After I left the walls of Freedom Field, I entered a world that was very similar to what I had left behind, but there were little differences. I kept treading through a ruined urban environment, traversing roads of crackled tarmac or walkways of broken concrete slabs, leaving ruined buildings left and right. However, the feeling was different. In Freedom Field, an empty building was empty, whereas out here, an empty building could harbor anything from a radroach to a gang of bloodthirsty raiders. I carried Lead Lily held tightly in my muzzle, locked and loaded, ready to fire against any possible threat.

The rain started pouring more and more over me. Even if at first I had enjoyed the fresh drops of water hitting my back and wetting me, it was starting to be a bit too much. The armor was starting to gather water in the joints and its weight had increased, making it far tougher for me to carry on. Plus, the tarmac was broken in many places, leaving holes that had filled of water, turning the sand beneath into mud. So, trying not to get too tired I decided to find shelter in a still standing building, in what seemed to be a shop.

Light poured inside the small store through the broken showcase window, its frame open like a wide mouth in a silent, endless scream; while small sprites of dust fluttered up and down in the pale streams of daylight. The rest of the shop remained in a partial penumbra, but I was able to outline all of the small depot with a quick glance. The used layout didn't differ much from the stores that still endured inside Freedom Field, and it was composed by shelves spanning along all the walls, a large cooler lying in the middle of the shop, and a counter close to the door.

Everything in the shop looked as if it had been left two or three days ago. Except for the fact that it was all covered in century-long dust. It was funny to see that nopony had decided to enter the place in all this time. There was going to be some loot to find if...

BEEP!

What in tarnation?

BEEP!

Uh, I didn't like that feel...

BEEP!

Better leave before something goes...

**BOOM!**

I was hurled away by an explosion, feeling like something red hot had stuck to my flank. I landed back outside, in the rain, over a forming pool of my own blood. The pain drew small stars in my sight, and made it hard for me to breathe. I couldn't get up, and my right flank was wet both from water and blood. I rolled over to see a piece of shrapnel piercing deeply into my flesh, right in the middle of my flank. Probably, right in the

middle of my Cutie Mark.

“Bullseye...” I gasped.

This would hurt like hell, but I knew I had to take that shrapnel off my body, or it would get worse without a doubt. I concentrated on the metal spike, and the glow from my horn enveloped it in a faint blue light. My magic wasn't too good with weights, but that I could do. I started to pull.

It was FAR worse than I had thought.

“Oh fuck, fuck, FUCK!” I yelled. If there were any raiders in the area, they already would know of my position.

Please, Celestia, make this quick. The jagged shred of metal had exited a little bit, around two centimeters, but it was still deeply stuck. I pulled again, but it wouldn't budge. The pain was starting to make my body feel numb. Still, I had to go on; as the numbness was starting to climb upward and hitting my brain.

“Daaaaaaaamn! Come out, you steely bastard!” I roared in a mix of rage and pain.

And it came out in a fountain of blood. I never felt so good, until I noticed I had to do something about the open, bleeding wound or I'd never live to tell again. Quickly, I dragged a bandage out of the saddlebag and rolled it hastily around the wound. I felt the bleeding stop, but the wound would have to be stitched. At least the magical bandage would keep everything in place. Still, the pain wouldn't leave unless I took something for it, and I happened to have no painkillers on me. With great effort, I got back on my hooves again and let the rain clean the blood off my fur.

No doubt nopony had entered the store, as it was a Celestia-damned death trap! Still, whatever laid inside could be interesting to loot. Funny, how my morality had quickly adjusted to the standards of this world. A year ago, I would have considered this stealing. Now, it was survival. I wondered if I could be classified as “bad”. Meh, who cared actually. I had a wounded flank, had been on the brink of dying and was the only living thing in a square kilometer. Fuck morality. Leave that for the Stables. If they had any.

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Using my telekinesis, I lifted a steel rebar from the debris on the street, and I used it to knock all the tiles in the shop, just to find if they were hiding any more death traps. I had been very lucky. Considering how deep the shrapnel had stuck in my flank, if I hadn't backed away in time, even all my armor wouldn't have stopped it from punching a hole in my body. Or worse, in my head, where I wore no armor at all; and once bitten, twice shy.

The store was clean of traps, what meant I was good to go once again; so I stumbled into the shop for the second time. The wound had closed and the bleeding was no more, but the pain remained. Every single step meant a titanic effort, but once here, I had to check the store; even if it was just to fill my pride.

Shelves full of dusty cleaning products looked at me in the penumbra of the small shop. Nothing of use to me here, as I had no knowledge of what I could do in the Wasteland with three boxes of Abraxo Cleaner or two bottles of turpentine. Still, behind the counter I could see a functioning terminal and what looked like a safe. Even if the safe could contain juicy stuff, I aimed for the terminal first, for two reasons. First, my lockpicking skills were absolutely pathetic; and second, I had no lock picking tools whatsoever. However, my upgraded PipBuck and my tech savvy would surely give me the edge on the terminal.

The terminal prompted for a password. I picked a cable from the PipBuck and jacked it into the terminal's entry port, which welcomed the connection with a faint beep. The device on my hoof asked for some data from the terminal, such as the serial number or the model type, data which I had no trouble finding in the casing of the computer. Once entered, the PipBuck buzzed and numbers started flashing in both screens. The buzzing endured for ten seconds more or less, and then the terminal beeped again, letting me know the protection had been overridden.

The menu offered me the choice of reading a series of diary entries or opening the safe. For some reason, probably to feed my curiosity upon why the Wasteland was still so urban, I started off with the logs. The safe could wait a little longer.

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**Entry 77:** *Everything is dead. No radio, no telephone, no power, no nothing. Still, the news keep coming, and the neighbors are very scared. Old Mr. Peachtree came yesterday and said Manehattan had been hit. No pony knows anything for sure, but I've heard that over two million lives were reaped there. So horrible! Is it our fate as well? Miss Limestone said that the Neighliss base garrison hasn't been deployed yet. Does that mean we're safe, or they simply don't know what to do?*

**Entry 80:** *I just heard about Canterlot... I'm still crying for our poor Princesses. Such horror... how did we end up this way? I used to know a zebra long ago. Nyssa. She was so sweet, with that funny way of speaking she had. I wonder what will have happened to her... Some soldiers from Neighliss came a while ago, giving instructions. It seems Las Pegasus will be safe. However, they said that some bombs did fall not too far away from here, so there is a certain radiation danger. We're supposed to sell RadSafe and RadAway from now on. I pray to Celestia, wherever she may be, that we don't have to sell too many.*

**Entry 88:** *It's been a week we haven't seen the sun. According to Miss Peachtree, the Zebra bombs hit Cloudsdale some days ago, killing everypony there. Since then, the pegasi have closed the skies and have hidden behind their cloud curtain. Those cowards, they have left us to rot here. I'm glad I don't know many pegasi.*

So that was what happened to the pegasi. It pretty much explained why there were none to be found anywhere, and why the New Pegasus walls had no anti-air defenses.

**Entry 125:** *The wall around Las Pegasus center is finished. Now it's called "New Pegasus", and they're letting no pony inside. They say only productive citizens can enter the new City. I've been paying my taxes to that city for years, they can't leave me outside like that! I'm going to knock at their door and politely ask them to let me in.*

**Entry 127:** *They didn't allow me into New Pegasus, but it was great to see so many ponies worried about what might happen to them out here. In the last few weeks, we've started to see so many strange ponies wandering around town, wearing spiked armors, all of them packing heat. I fear any of those "raiders" might enter my store and rob it. Or worse, they might kill me for my money! I have to do something.*

**Entry 141:** *Another wall is being built north of New Pegasus. It seems the folks worried for their future have decided to build themselves a new township. Mr. Branch told me that everypony will be free to enter and settle as long as they respect some rules of engagement. They're going to call it "Freedom Field". Sunflower says it's a lousy name, but for me it's as good as any other. What matters is that it will be a safe place to live. I hope we can move the store in there.*

**Entry 165:** *I knew this day could come, but that doesn't make it any easier. We have managed to get ourselves a small shack in Freedom Field, but they don't allow us to start a business in there. We'll have to find a new living in there. However, the store is still mine, so I've decided to rig it all with mines, so that no pony can come in and rob what's mine. I've bought a case of 20 mines from one of those "raiders", and I'm going to arm them as we leave. Someday, I'll come back to claim what's mine.*

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That was the last entry. Obviously, the former owner hadn't come back, but I had read he had placed twenty mines, and the one I blew up was the last of them. No doubt no pony had entered the shop in all this time. I decided to open the safe using the terminal command. The safe buzzed and unlocked with a gentle click, and I used my magic to pull the door open. I didn't know what I was trying to find, but what was there was definitely interesting.

A gun; a perfectly working, almost shiny pitch-black pistol that screamed "Awesome!" all over it. Smooth lines, well balanced both for mouth or magic, light weight and a small carving of a cloud with a thunderbolt on the hilt. It seemed like a great loot so I took it with me. It wouldn't replace my repeater rifle, but still, it would make for a good secondary weapons, if my rifle decided it didn't want to shoot anymore.

Packing everything into my saddlebags, I came out of the shop once again. This time, it had stopped raining, but the thick black cloud ceiling was still up in the sky. I trod down the street paying attention to everything

around, trying to hear voices in the wind, trying to see shapes in the distance; but there was nothing, I was alone.

As I kept advancing towards the mysterious Stable, the buildings started to disappear from my surroundings. Many of the standing houses weren't more than jagged pillars of stone, brick and metal, standing defiant to the will of the Wasteland. There were many scorch marks on the walls, bullet holes and pieces of shrapnel around, what made me believe this had been used as a shooting range for raiders and such, and this was what made the owner of the shop want to leave it and head for Freedom Field.

Slowly, the last houses of old Las Pegasus' suburbs were left behind me, and the urban landscape was substituted by a dry plain. Everywhere I looked, everything was full of yellow and ochre tones, instead of the brick red, cinder block gray or asphalt black. Still, a few small shacks remained here and there, scattered over the desert. I checked on the map once again. I'd have to turn left soon in order to head towards the Stable I was looking for. I would have done that, if a gunshot hadn't broken the silence.

Common sense told me to leave. Logic told me to avoid any confrontation, since I wasn't ready to fight anypony; because my flank still hurt like hell and I couldn't walk properly, let alone run. Even if I was rather confident with my rifle, I wasn't trained in hoof-to-hoof combat, and my current condition wasn't the best to make a run for it. Still, something inside me made me start lifting my rifle in combat stance and slowly walk towards the noise.

My E.F.S. beeped, showing four points: three marked in red and one in green. Three hostiles and one friendly, dead ahead. Whatever it was, it was located behind a small grassy knoll. I crept upward, my rifle before me, trying not to make a single noise. Almost crawling, I reached the top of the knoll and looked beyond. What I witnessed almost made me throw up once again. Three hostiles, indeed; three bucks clad in armors made of rubber, scrap metal, black leather, iron spikes and what looked like bones were firing at the upper floor of a two-storey building in ruins, where the friendly pony was hiding. On the floor below I saw two ponies, a stallion and a mare, both dead and horribly mutilated. Their limbs had been torn apart, their guts were spilled all over the floor and their blood formed gruesome crimson pools on the sand. Plus, one of the raiders had severed the patch of hide with the Cutie Mark of each of them, and wore the Marks as a mockery trophy. Even if I already had seen my share of violence and evil in Freedom Field, this was just deranged.

"Come on! We promise we won't harm you!" one of the raiders groaned.

"That's right!" another followed, "we only want to play with you!"

"Yeah right, Frisco!" the first crackled, "you'll be the only one playing. After that, you'll leave her so used up we won't be able to have any more fun."

"Shut up, Bosco!" Frisco scowled. "You banged up her mommy pretty well. She was almost dead by the time I got to grab her. Also, I don't think your small friend can work anymore today."

I felt bile climb up my throat. Fucking degenerates. They had raped and killed the mare, and most probably killed the stallion while she watched; and there was another one left.

"Leave me alone! Just go, please!" a voice cried out desperately.

A filly. A damn FILLY! How could they? Celestia, why? This was the Wasteland? Well, something, somewhere, had to have gone terribly wrong. Rage was clouding my mind, and I had to do something about it, so I aimed my rifle and activated S.A.T.S. Suddenly, the world changed. My perception became sharp, almost Celestia-tier. Time itself slowed down, giving me the edge to calmly aim at the raiders and take clear shots. I aimed Lead Lily towards the raider called Bosco.

"Take that, you motherfucking rapist!" I mumbled and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

The shot went wide and ended up punching a hole in the brick wall of the building. Naturally, this alerted the raiders of my presence, so I had lost most of my tactical advantage. Still, I aimed again, this time laying the rifle in the floor and sticking it between my head and foreleg.

**BLAM!**

Lead Lily bucked me in the face with the strength of a piston, numbing me for a second, but this time the bullet reached its target. Bosco's head exploded like a watermelon, spraying blood, bone and brain fragments all over the place. One down, next one was Frisco. I aimed at his head again, held my breath and tried to keep the rifle steady as I fired.

**BLAM!**

Frisco fell to the floor, but he wasn't dead. Gut shot, most probably. It would kill him after having to endure hours of pain. One left to go, but sadly for me, S.A.T.S. had already worn off. I was having real trouble holding Lily in place, and the bullets buzzing around me wouldn't help me aim calmly either.

**BLAM!**

Close, very fucking close. The bullet flashed past the raider's face, wounding him in the process. Blood came out of a gash in his muzzle. A nasty scar, but that wouldn't kill him, nor stop him from firing my way. However, when he moved I could see that he was wearing a big saddlebag full of what looked like metal apples with small rings attached. Somehow, something in my mind clicked, making me think that had to be some sort of explosive device. Well, it was bigger than his head and I lost nothing by trying a shot there. A buzz of my PipBuck let me know that S.A.T.S. was already back online; so I let myself slip into the focus of the targeting system, breathed deep, aimed at the saddlebag and fired.

**BOOM!**

Fireworks followed, since a bunch of explosive apples triggered themselves in a sort of chain reaction. The silent raider was reduced to mincemeat, which landed everywhere in a ten meter radius. It made look as if both Bosco and Frisco had been gunned down in a hail of bullets, since they were all caked in the third raider's blood. I stepped out of my cover, heading towards the building. The filly hadn't said anything since the firefight started.

"Hey, little one!" I called out, "it's okay. Come out, the raiders are no more, and I mean no harm, honest."

"...You bastard," a voice gurgled. That wasn't the filly, and I suddenly realized that Frisco wasn't dead yet! I quickly aimed Lily at him and fired.

**BANG! BLAM!**

Two shots, but I only fired one. I felt as if a spear of fire punched me from below, setting my whole body in flames. Frisco was dead on the floor, but I...

*THUD.*

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Oh good Luna, my whole body was in pain. Breathing was a painstaking effort, and my body felt all numb. I didn't know if I was lying down on sand or stone, and I couldn't feel my hooves either; but surprisingly enough, I was alive. Alive and rather well, I might add. Something made me feel calm, in peace. Something was soothing me; and that very feeling made me think something was off.

I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was Frisco's dead body, still lying in the floor. Flies had started to gather around the corpse, getting ready for a feast. Nothing had changed from the moment before Frisco shot me down, but something felt different, soothing, calm. I tried to move my head to see what could it be, but a sting of pain forced me to keep it in the original position. I grumbled in pain.

"Oh, you're awake!" the voice of the filly came cleanly from behind.

Suddenly, an unicorn filly appeared before me, with a broad smile on her face. She was of a faint pink color, with a fiery red mane with white strands. She was still a blank flank, so she had to be very young, but she was healing me all by herself!

"You're getting along pretty well, and that's good! I took the bullet out and stitched the wounds, both the gunshot and the ugly one on your flank. You really should carry more healing potions when travelling in the

wasteland.” she said sternly. “I can’t thank you enough for saving me. I’m Desert Rose, pleased to meet you!”

“Hi.” I tried to grin. “I’m Farsight, pleasure’s all mine.”

“Hi, Farsight! I think I’m done!” She left me on the floor. I fought with my body to get back on my hooves. It was very painful, but I’d have to cope with it.

“Thank you.” I smiled. “What happened here? Were these your parents?”

“No, my parents died a long time ago.” She answered with a streak of sadness gracing her face. “These were Mister and Mrs. Pewter. We pretended to be a family, and they always said how nice it was to be my uncle and auntie. They argued a lot about money. Uncle Pewter had gambled too much on the Four Little Diamonds, so we had to leave Freedom Field. That was a week ago..”

Rose looked down and away, hiding newly formed tears as the present came rolling back in her mind. “These ponies, they woke us up in the middle of the night. They killed uncle Pewter.. Then they.. They.”

I offered my shoulder and patted her on the back. There we stood in somber silence, as Rose hopefully came to grips with what had transpired. I wondered if the Buckmares had been cruel enough to send these degenerates to claim such a debt, or was it all just random chance?

“Listen, Rose.” My voice echoed in the silence, and I looked down on this one foal. It was selfish of me, but considering the alternatives I hoped she would not refuse. “I know this is very sudden, but we can’t stay here for much longer. I made a lot of noise, and I’d rather not stay for whatever comes looking. Even if they weren’t your real uncle and aunt. You probably have time to say goodbye.”

“We?” Rose looked up to me with reddened eyes and a quivering lip. “You’re taking me with you?” It was almost as if she was accusing me of taking her away from something, but here there were only dead ponies and desert. “I can’t fight like you did.”

“No, but you did a good job on my wounds, much better than I could have done all by myself, and I could use the company.”

While Rose said goodbye to the dead, I checked out Frisco’s pockets. It wasn’t much. Some caps, bullets for his pistol, and a package of inhalants wrapped inside a paper bag. Written on the paper bag in hasty, big letters was the word DASH. I stored it in my bags, but didn’t like the way they looked. Bosco carried a badge of sorts. Two unicorn heads, crossed. NER, it seemed like a soldier tag. Could this be the unicorns Goldie had talked about?

“You’re robbing them?” I looked up and saw Rose looking at me from afar. “Isn’t this bad?”

I stopped searching, puzzled by her question. Desert Rose had morality? I couldn’t help but smile at the thought. Considering that she had lived her entire life in the wastes and still knew right from wrong gave me hope, but this sense of morals had to be wiped out of her before they killed her.

“Rose. They are dead, it’s not bad to steal from the dead”

Rose mumbled something I couldn’t make out what it was. She had already been through a lot in very short time, so I didn’t ask what. There would be a time for talking later.

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The first hours of our common history went by in silence, as Rose was still recovering from the horrors she had been through and I was too busy scouting the area for possible dangers. The area that we were crossing right now was a sandy basin, a large extension of white and golden dunes, where the wind formed small vortexes of dust that danced before us in a sort of silent waltz. I found myself mesmerized by the wonders of nature; thinking about how ponykind could have wanted to destroy something so worthwhile. There were things I just couldn’t grasp.

“Farsight...” Rose poked me in the side.

“Err... what now?” I asked, shaking my head.

“Can I ask you something?” Rose smiled shyly, as we were still getting to know each other. In order to build some bridges between us, I was trying to be as friendly and welcoming as possible.

“Of course, go ahead.”

“What is your Cutie Mark?”

I grunted with astonishment, and told her what it was despite my loathing of Cutie Marks in general. “It’s an open and staring red eye. You’ll see it when we make camp.”

Rose gasped in surprise. “A red eye? Really?”

I sighed, thinking myself the fool for letting a filly lead the conversation, and yet there was something in the way Rose now looked to my flank. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s with my Cutie Mark?”

“Uncle Pewter had fled from Equestria, and he told me about a bad pony called Red Eye, some sort of dictator that enslaved the population. You... you won’t have anything to do with him, won’t you?”

I laughed, fairly surprised at her reaction. I already knew the name Red Eye from the book of the Light Bringer; the power-crazy self-proclaimed Messiah of the Wastelands, who wanted to become a new God by means of some sort of mutagen. Of course, like any bad guy in an adventure novel, he died in the end; his plan stopped by the heroine. To be honest, until now I had believed that the whole Light Bringer story was a myth, but I was becoming more and more convinced about its veracity.

“Rose, it’s the first time I hear of the actual existence of a buck called Red Eye. Whoever he was, your Uncle came to Neighvada a long time ago, so he might be dead already. I have never been as far away from New Pegasus as I am now, which means that I have nothing to do with that Red Eye. It’s all a funny coincidence.”

“All right...” Rose seemed to have believed me, as she looked calmer now.

“And you, Rose? What’s your Mark?”

“I have none... I still haven’t found my talent.” She lowered her head in regret.

“And what is wrong with it?” I asked. “The way I see it, you have limitless potential to become what you want to become. You’ll get your Cutie Mark someday, but don’t get obsessed with it. Look at me, I have mine, but I don’t know what my special talent is.”

Rose gave me a kind smile, and we continued walking towards our target.

“So, what did you say you were looking for?” Rose asked.

“A Stable... somewhere close from here.” I replied.

“Yup. And what’s a Stable?” she asked with fillyish curiosity.

“Well, a Stable is...” Heh. I had to explain what a Stable was for the first time, and I couldn’t find the words to do so; even if I had lived in one for years. “You are aware that this place used to be something different than a Wasteland long ago, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. So they tell, but I think it’s all a fairy tale.”

“You might as well be right. However, it seems that before the War some ponies called Stable-Tec built a series of shelters to survive a hypothetical megaspell war.”

“What’s ‘hypothetical’?”

“Possible, not sure, theoretic. Whatever. In case of a war, some chosen ponies would move into the Stables, which would allow them to survive the holocaust. I was born and raised in one of them, but they kicked me out... I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?” Rose whined.

“I... went through some rough times.” I felt sorrow clutch me once again. Just when I had thought I had finally banished my past from my soul, Rose’s innocent curiosity was bringing it back. “I was cast out because I spoke too much, because I wanted to do the right thing and that was uncomfortable to some ponies.”

Then, when they had the chance to free themselves of me, they didn't think twice, and I ended up walking through this mad world. I could have lived peacefully if I had learned my place."

"Do you regret having done what you did?" Rose asked. It was a surprisingly good question.

"No. I did what my mind told me was right."

"Then don't blame yourself." Rose smiled. "I don't know you, but I think that in the very deep, you think you're the one at fault. I might be a filly, but I know that one must do what one thinks is the right thing. You can't blame yourself for following your heart."

I looked at the filly and smiled sadly, but not because of her. I felt sad for all the time I had spent dreaming of how my life would have been down in the Stable. Rose had opened my eyes, so to speak. Her words tore those thoughts apart and shone new light on my life. Now, Stable 188 was nothing more than a score I would try to settle sometime.

"Thanks, Rose." I hugged her again. "Thank you so much."

"You're welcome!" She grinned. "Why are you looking for a Stable, then?"

"I need to find something that's only in a Stable."

"Oh, and what's on those Stables that we need to find?"

"A Water Talisman. Before you ask, it's a magic device that creates water. It helps to keep the water supply of the Stable running."

"But won't the ponies that live in the Stable need it?" I was starting to like Rose, because she asked good questions, even for a small filly.

"It seems it's abandoned. Something is off with that Stable business."

"Should I be worried?"

"I don't know; I honestly don't know. Maybe you should have this." I lifted the black handgun and hovered it towards Rose.

"A gun? I-I can't."

"Take it. Even if you don't use it, it's better than being unarmed. We don't know what we might find."

"I-I don't know..." she stuttered. Poor Rose... I definitely understood what she was going through, since I had been through it not that long ago.

"Stop whining, Rose, and please take the gun. I hope you don't have to use it, but please, please, pretty please with a cherry on top. I can't be protecting you every single minute."

"Okay..." Rose shrugged and took the gun and ammo. She seemed confused about it, looking it over once, twice, three times...

"Aim the cannon to the enemy and pull the trigger; and remember to hold the gun tightly. It's that simple."

"Uh-huh." Rose nodded but kept silent.

*\*BLEEP!\** The PipBuck came alive, telling me we had discovered a new location... Stable 173. I checked the map again, just to see we had made it to our destination. Now we had to find the entrance to the complex. After all, Stables had the nasty habit of being hidden underground, dressed up as sewers. This time it wasn't that hard, as a lonely shack stood out in the middle of the desert.

The shack was nothing but the cover for another ponyhole, this one with the number 173 engraved on it. I lifted the ponyhole cover and entered the hole, lighting the pit with my PipBuck. It was a similar design to that of Stable 188, a single sewer tunnel leading directly to the massive cog-shaped gate with the number 173 painted on yellow paint on it.

"That's a Stable?" Rose asked in amazement.

“The gate to it. The Stable lies behind.” I replied.

“And how do we enter?”

“There should be a terminal close to the door. I’ll try to override the gate controls to open it.”

I headed to the terminal and jacked my PipBuck into it. This one would be tricky, because it had been custom-built, so I would have to hack it manually. Luckily enough for me, I did know a thing or two about a Stable’s security protocols, so it didn’t become as difficult as it would have appeared to be at a first glance. The door screeched and glowy orange lights started flashing in warning. A clash of metal against metal filled the air, and the door to Stable 173 retracted and rolled aside, leaving us open room into it.

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Quiet; the place was too quiet. Everything seemed fine, oddly fine. The soft humming of the generators filled the air, but that was it. I would have expected to have at least a couple of Security guards pop up and ask us what we wanted here. Hell, I’d expected a hail of bullets as a fair welcome! Instead, there was nothing.

The door hadn’t been operated in two hundred years, or that was what the terminal data said. Besides, the screeching of the door and the amount of dirt it moved was a hint in the same direction. Inside, a thick layer of dust had settled over every surface in the place; what led me to think that this Stable hadn’t been inhabited in quite a long time.

“Is it supposed to be this quiet?” Rose asked, “I don’t like it here. It gives me the creeps.”

“Yes, something is off here.” I scowled. “The caravaner said it was abandoned, but this looks like nopony entered or exited the place, so it shouldn’t be ‘abandoned’; and still, I have the feeling we are alone.”

I started to walk past the security checkpoint and into the main complex, with Rose following me closely. We went down a staircase and arrived at the main Atrium, the sound of our hooves echoing grimly in the thick silence of the Stable. All lights were on, and I looked up expecting to see something in the Overmare’s office, but I was disappointed once again. Nothing in sight, this place was deserted.

“Don’t you hear something?” Rose asked.

“What?” I couldn’t hear anything out of the soft, background humming of the rebreathers.

“I don’t know, it’s something very faint, it comes and goes.”

“Could you track it?” I asked.

“I’ll try...” Rose started moving around in circles, as if she was trying to catch a scent. She stopped dead on her tracks and lifted a hoof towards a small room. “Try there.”

The room in question was a small utility room in the corner of the Atrium. I opened the door by pressing a button with my hoof, and I almost fell on my flanks. What sort of horror had happened in here?

“What’s wrong?” Rose came closer.

“Rose, don’t!” I tried to stop her.

“Wha-AAAAAAH!!!” Rose screamed and bolted away, crying.

“Rose, stop! Come back!” I ran after her, catching her before she could go any further. She was crying and shaking in fear. I tried to comfort her, but I was too scared myself to provide any safety to the poor filly.

What I had seen in the room went beyond the craziest, darkest of my nightmares. The back wall of the room, usually a gray concrete wall, had been painted with the face of a hellish mare. Her mane, totally flat, fell before her face, covering one half of it. The other half was giving a deadly glare, her eye contracted to a tiny dot, her muzzle forming a blood-freezing smile. All by itself, it would have been horrid; but it was even more disgusting when I had noticed it had been painted in blood! The rotting body of a young pony was lying on the floor. It couldn’t have been much older than a filly... Was this her doing?

“That face...” Rose cried, “I’ve seen that face BEFORE!”

“Where? When?” I asked, startled at the revelation.

“I don’t know... when we entered the Stable. I started hearing a noise, and I looked at a hallway... and I saw her, I swear. I-I-I...” Rose started crying again.

“Listen, Rose. There must be an explanation to this. No matter how disgusting it may be, there is always an explanation. If that mare is real, we’ll find her, and she’ll pay.”

“O-okay...” Rose sniffed.

“Now, don’t get far from me, Rose. I don’t know what we can be facing.”

Rose nodded and gulped. She was going through hell, but we had to carry on. A mixture of curiosity and fear moved me once again, curiosity to learn about what had happened here, and fear of the looming threat that this Stable was. Besides, I somehow felt I owed something to the Dwellers here. At least, some closure, even if it wasn’t my Stable.

We went back into the room where the horrid painting was. On a second look, it was scary, but it wasn’t as terrible as before. After all, it was nothing but a mare’s face, even if it was terribly ugly... No, it wasn’t ugly, as she had her share of beauty, even in a wretched, warped way. It was more unsettling than ugly. Actually, what really scared me was the realization that something terrible had happened in this place.

A terminal was humming on the desk of the small utility room. I hadn’t noticed at first glance, but now it called me with its soft green glow. I felt that diving into computers gave me a moment of peace from the turmoil of the Wasteland. I readied the PipBuck to breach the security of the terminal, but I noticed it was unlocked; so I pressed a key and started reading.

Lavender. The word Lavender appeared all around, in every single file of the memory. Actually, it was the only word that appeared in the terminal... Lavender everywhere. Who or what was this Lavender? Only the last entry, which had been jotted down a month ago, was readable.

*“Finally it’s complete... Lavender is here with me. Now I can rest.”*

Did that mean that Lavender was the scary mare painted on the wall? That was the most logical guess. I turned back and saw Rose staring at the painting, as if she had lost all her fear and was mesmerized by Lavender’s (?) glare.

“Lavender...” she murmured.

“What did you just say?” I screamed. What was going on in here?

“Uh... what?” Rose seemed to pop out of a dream.

“Did you just say *Lavender*?”

“I didn’t say anything... well, not that I remember.”

Rose looked at me, and I noticed she was being honest. She DIDN’T remember. Which was, I might add, far more disturbing than the fact that she had said the word ‘Lavender’. I had clearly heard her say it. If she had said it consciously, she could have heard me mutter the name before, or she could have read it elsewhere; but she hadn’t said it on purpose... Something else was talking through her. Something that, seemingly, affected young ponies first, taking into account that I hadn’t felt anything out of the ordinary yet.

We walked past the Atrium and into the medical wing of the Stable. I feared we might be seeing true bloodshed here, taking into account that we had witnessed a truly hellish scene in a small room. However, the room was clean, too clean. No remains on the stretchers, no dirty tools on the trays. One could come to think nothing had happened here. Rose, however, detected something out of the ordinary as soon as we opened the door.

“It smells odd in here... like something sweet, sticky. I don’t like this smell.” Rose waved a hoof trying to sweep the smell off her face.

I didn’t like it either. It was sticky indeed, a madly sweet smell that made my gut churn. It was the smell of blood and death, I had smelled it in the Fort, when I was recovering. It was the smell of a ghoul, the smell of

decay; but there was nothing my E.F.S. was detecting. Rose advanced towards what looked like the morgue of the medical wing.

“Stop, Rose.” I looked at her sternly. “Let me go first.”

I somehow knew what I’d find and I readied myself to see the image of dead bodies rotting in a pile, but still, what I saw went far beyond what I could have imagined. Somepony had taken the care of using the innards of the dead ponies to weave an inscription all over the morgue, the word LAVENDER written in guts and blood. I slammed the door shut before Rose could take a look inside, and crashed my hoof against the button.

“What was in there?” Rose asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“But I...”

“NO.”

Rose nodded and glared at me in a way I didn’t like at all, as if she stared directly into my soul. She didn’t move at all, she only kept looking at me with that face... I felt chills run down my spine.

“Rose...?”

“Uh... what?” She snapped out of a trance of sorts.

“Nevermind.” There she was again. Something was definitely messing with her mind, and I was starting to feel worried about my own safety. Would I end up like the rest of the ponies in the Stable, gruesomely murdered as a sacrifice to whatever that Lavender was?

I spotted a terminal glowing close to the entrance of the Medical Wing. I unlocked it (no password, once again) and started reading through the entries. Most of them were routine entries, reporting colds or mild injuries, such as a sprained hoof. However, some time later entries started to become interesting.

**Entry 1616:** *Cinnamon Twill started acting funny yesterday on her class. She said she could hear somepony calling her by her name, but nopony heard anything but her. Not that I want to doubt about her honesty, but all the tests I conducted went negative. She still keeps saying somepony is calling her. Just that. Calling her.*

**Entry 1688:** *Cinnamon keeps talking about this Lavender pony. Nopony knows who she is, but apparently she’s supposed to be a mare. She’s becoming obsessed with her, and the worst thing about it is that more colts and fillies have started mentioning Lavender. They speak about seeing her in dark hallways, hearing her on the ducts... I sometimes think Lavender is a ghost story the fillies invented to have fun. Still, there’s something... weird about it. I’m starting to be afraid of the colts and fillies around here.*

**Entry 1777:** *We found Cinnamon dead yesterday. She had slit her forelegs yesterday and written Lavender all around her room until she died of blood loss. It was a horrible sight to see. I haven’t been able to sleep all night, that image haunts me every time I close my eyes. What scared me even more is that the young ones didn’t even stir when we told them Cinnamon had died. It felt like they had seen it coming. And now all the Stable talks about Lavender. If we wanted to spread a horror story, we’ve made it.*

**Entry 1833:** *Raincloud attacked her parents last night with a knife. The father is okay, just some shallow cuts. Her mother, on the other hand, took a stab to the lung. My crew is working very hard to heal her, but I’m not too optimistic. The Overmare decided to confine Raincloud into a small utility room close to the Atrium. I’ve been hearing her mindless blabbering about Lavender all morning. I want to talk to her, but the Overmare won’t let me. Says it’s dangerous.*

**Entry 1861:** *We stopped hearing Raincloud yesterday. I immediately thought something was wrong, but the Overmare insisted on waiting. When she has finally decided to go check up on her, we’ve found her dead on a pool of her own blood. She had slit her throat with a makeshift blade. But the most horrid thing we found is the picture on the wall. She painted the face of a mare using her blood as paint. It’s horrible, I feel like the mare on the wall stares into my soul... Is this the dreaded Lavender?*

**Entry 1914:** *Attacks have increased in the last few days. Since the death of Raincloud, all the colts have gone*

*nuts about Lavender. They speak about having to feed blood to the mare, having to offer sacrifice to the Almighty Lavender... What is this madness? Who is behind all this? I am afraid to walk the hallways alone.*

**Entry 1966:** *This will be my last entry, most probably. The colts have run amok, stabbing and killing everypony in the Stable, screaming 'Lavender' like a prayer to an evil god. I have locked myself with some other ponies in the Medical Wing. We have supplies and some weapons, so I think we can take for a while. However, we won't last forever. At some point, we'll have to open the door again to look for more supplies... What's that? They're already here... I can hear them slamming the door, and tinkering with the switch. I hope they can't override the lock, or we'll be cornered. Please, Celestia, help us...*

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Such horror, such madness. I felt shivers from the very thought of what had happened in this place. We had only scraped the surface of the eldritch monstrosity that the Stable had been through. We... or only me, most probably. Rose kept acting weird, shifting between what seemed to be two planes of reality. There was the Rose I had met, firm in her resolve, silent yet fairly expressive; the Rose I was really starting to like. But then, without any kind of warning, another Rose came forward. She would stop like dead on her tracks, she would start humming discordantly... something was messing with her mind, and what freaked me out the most is that the second Rose was starting to gain control over the first Rose.

We left the Medical Wing and headed towards the main Quarters. Stains of blood were more and more frequent as we trod down the silent hallways of the Stable, and I could feel the air thickening as we advanced. It was probably a trick of my mind, a product of my fear, but I swear I started to have actual trouble breathing. Rose, on the other hoof, seemed to follow me without any difficulty.

The Quarters were the image anypony could have of hell. Caked blood covered the walls; graffiti made of guts and body fluids had covered the gray concrete turning it into a cacophony of red, brown and black, and the word 'Lavender' appeared every few steps. One of the rooms was grimly decorated with bones from other ponies, their skeletons forming geometrical patterns of the most devious kind. And faces, faces everywhere, like the one we saw in the utility room. That one eye, piercing my soul with its hellish glare; that maniacal smile... Who was Lavender?

Room by room, I checked every single one looking for information that could clarify what had happened here. From what I saw laying in the floor, I assumed that every single pony had died in an orgy of blood and that we were the only ones alive in what had become a massive grave. In one of the last ones, I was lucky enough to find a working holotape, and played it after having closed the door behind me. I didn't want Rose to hear anything, since she was acting very strangely.

*"I don't know what has happened to all the colts and fillies in the Stable. First Cinnamon Twill, then Raincloud, and now the rest are acting weird. They keep talking about this Lavender mare, they say she's coming, they say she speaks to them, but in a way we can't hear her. Only they can.*

*I have studied Psychology, so I know what I'm talking about; and this really overwhelms me. There must be foul play behind all this. As a colt, me and my friends did make up horror stories to have fun. But this is not usual behaviour. This has become viral, like if they had become infected by something that makes them hear things, see things. And finally, become suicidal. Or what I'm starting to fear, ponycidal.*

*Tomorrow morning I'm going to speak to the Overmare. If somepony has the clearance to know if something out of the ordinary is happening here, that is her. I have the feeling that she'll have to clarify some stuff."*

The holotape ended with a hollow click. Indeed, the Overmare should have known something about what happened here. That was the only hope. Either it was that way, or we could be facing a foe too big for us to confront. I opened the room to find Rose standing like a statue, looking at me eye-to-eye. That was creepy. So creepy I walked back a step or two.

"Ro-Rose?" I stuttered.

"Uh... What again, Farsight?" The first Rose, the one that didn't freak me out, returned to the front.

"What were you doing, Rose?" I asked.

“Me? Nothing... hey, wait a minute. What am I doing here? I was waiting outside the Quarters!”

Now that sent chills running down my spine. She was having memory blackouts, which sounded like the issues the Stable fillies had been through, according to what I had found. Whatever this ‘infection’ was, it had affected Rose as well and was gaining control of her mind. I had to find out what was going on, and quickly, or I would regret having entered the Stable.

The Overmare’s office was right in front of me. Answers, at least! Or that was I hoping to find. I needed to get some information on what was going on. Since we left the Quarters, Rose had become silent, only to hum that horrible tune every now and then. Evil Rose was back on the saddle, and that was the worst case scenario for me. I stopped and turned around to see what she was up to. She was facing the corridor we had come from, totally silent. Then, she slowly turned her head to look at me... with the blood-freezing glare I had seen in the gruesome paintings all across the Stable!

“Lavender is hereeeeeee...” she sung, while giving me the scariest grin I had ever seen.

“Rose? Rose!! Snap out of it!!” I was desperate, but I immediately realized there was nothing to be done. Evil Rose had taken over.

At least she couldn’t hurt me... no, wait. I felt like thunderstruck. I had. Given. Rose. A. GUN. Rose had a gun! She knew that, since I saw the small black pistol float out of her small pouch, enveloped on a faint pink glow. I turned around and ran for my life. In other circumstances, I would have tried to fight back, but I couldn’t harm a filly, I simply could not. I sprinted towards the Overmare’s office. If I could lock myself up before she could...

**BANG!**

She could. The bullet hit my left hindleg, right on the knee. I could almost feel the joint blasting in a million shards, sending waves of burning pain through my body. I fell to the floor, hitting the metal with my belly and face; but I couldn’t give up, or I’d be dead. A surge of adrenalin let me crawl into the office and lock myself up. At least, I had gained some time.

I stumbled onto the Overmare’s desk, to find the rotting body of a mare behind it. A small pistol laid close to the corpse, which led me to think she had committed suicide. It did sound like there was some foul play indeed. Since the Overmare wouldn’t be able to tell me anything about the dark secrets of the Stable, I would have to dive into her terminal to find them.

“I’m coming for youuuuu...” I heard Rose’s voice behind the door, and what was worse, I could see here through a security monitor. She had spotted the camera and was glaring at me with a soul-shattering smirk.

I’d have to work fast. Sooner or later, Rose would figure out how to break the lock of the office door, and then I would be cornered, which meant dead; since I was just unable to fight her. I jacked my PipBuck into the terminal, and started furiously clicking the controls of my reliable hoof-mounted device. My mind was in the middle of a fight between the excruciating pain of my knee and the flow of adrenalin that fought to keep me working.

The terminal proved to be a tough one, but I ended up hacking its security. Suddenly, a recording prompted itself to the front, asking me to open it. I did so, and the voice of a mare boomed through the speakers.

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*“Hello there. My name is Scootaloo, president of Stable-Tec. You might know me for my amazing feats at the GALLoPS and... oh, I hate this. I hate all the formality in these recordings. How many Stables have we actually built?”*

*Oh, well, whatever. Listen, if you are hearing this, it means that the Omega-level security protocols have been activated and that you have been appointed as the Overmare of your Stable, which, to put it short, means that things have gone really bad and that you’re responsible for the well-being of the ponies sheltered in there.*

*However, at Stable-Tec we believe that this crisis is an opportunity. A chance to learn from what we made*

wrong, a chance to be better. We have to be better. So, in order to be better, we ask you to conduct an experiment with the ponies living in your facility. There is no harm involved for the population, that I guarantee you. Still, if you don't feel comfortable about it, you are more than welcome not to conduct the investigation.

*In order to brief you of the details of the experiment, I leave you with the head developer of the program."*

The voice changed to that of another mare, higher pitched one.

*"Hello there, I'm Mint Flake, main developer of the Lavender Fields program here at Stable-Tec. Your Stable has been designed to host the experiments of this research. Lavender Fields is a study on the subliminal mind conditioning of ponies at an early age. What we intend to achieve is the elimination of violent behavior in colts and fillies, which has greatly increased because of the downfall of the pony society of Equestria. We believe that if the new generations are free of violence, a new spring of love and tolerance will come to this land, you being the harbingers of this rebirth!"*

*Let me explain the functioning of this project. Our investigation in the field of pony neurology has shed some surprising discoveries. The Lavender Fields experiment is aimed at ponies of a certain age, mostly colts and fillies close to obtaining their Cutie Mark. Statistic research shows that the violent behaviour in ponies isn't present until that age, and that is why our staff psychiatrists think it is the best time to tackle the problem.*

*Many studies were conducted for years trying to eradicate violence from young ponies by using cognitive psychology, that is, speaking to them and making them understand why violence is wrong. However, the success rate of those experiments was low, close to the twenty percent of the subjects were able to reason away from violence. Therefore, in order to obtain greater results, we have developed a subliminal approach.*

*Our research in brain growth has shown that the brain of the younger ponies is especially receptive towards some frequencies close to the top and bottom frequencies of the hearing spectrum. By stimulating them with a stream of information coded into these frequencies, we expect to modify the colts' and fillies' behaviour, without altering their personality in any other way. The rest of the population will be immune to the sonic field.*

*If you desire to activate the Lavender Fields experiment, or if you desire to stop it, you can do so from your secure Terminal. Thank you for your cooperation, Overmare. And remember, the fate of a new Equestria is on your hooves."*

The recording ended there. Mind conditioning! That did explain everything. Only colts and fillies were affected, and the change in behavior was slow, gradual. They weren't brainwashed, only substituted by another personality. However, the recording spoke of "elimination of violent behavior". What had happened to make it all go wrong?

I returned to the terminal, and while I browsed the options I found the one I was looking for: "End Lavender Fields experiment". I clicked it and took a look at the security monitor, to see that Rose had changed. She wasn't slamming the door anymore; she just looked around, apparently confused.

"Farsight...?" she said, her voice trembling. She was in clear shock.

"Give me a minute, Rose." I yelled, so she could hear me. I crawled back to the door and released the lock. Rose trotted into the room and saw my bullet wound in the knee.

"I did that?" she screamed, tears in her eyes. "I'm so sorry!!! Let me help you, please..."

"It wasn't you, Rose. Now I know it wasn't you."

Rose smiled faintly, and started lifting bandages from my saddlebag. She took some painkiller pills from a medical pouch she carried and made me swallow them. I felt pain drift away, and sighed. Now that all that darkness was gone, we could return to our duty, that is, to retrieve a water talisman; but before, I needed to check one thing, and returned to the terminal. There it was, a last memo from the Overmare, what looked like a suicide note.

*"To anypony who might read this:*

*I'm sorry. I feel I'm the one to blame for the evil I've brought to this Stable. None of my predecessors wanted to conduct the experiment, they said it was evil and tyrannical, and that we had no guarantees of success, only a damn recording from before the War.*

*I, however, decided to do it. Don't ask me why, I thought it had to be done. Maybe I believed that patriotic chatter of the recording, telling us we should be better and all that jazz. It was supposed to turn all our young ponies into happy, peaceful folk, and instead, we bred a monster named Lavender.*

*Some days after the first murder happened, I thought that something could be wrong on the recordings we played. Some data could have corrupted over time, due to the radiation, or because of some power outage, or whatever. So I asked Tinfoil Beam, our resident PipBuck technician, to take a look at the data files. He said everything was fine!*

*I could have stopped it then. But I didn't. I had the hope that the cases of Cinnamon Twill and Raincloud were exceptions, and that the rest of the colts and fillies would react positively to the program. I was wrong, and now the whole Stable is soaking with blood. I've locked myself up in my Office, but I can see them through the camera. They're coming for me. But they won't take me alive.*

*Sorry, and goodbye."*

I cried in rage. I slammed the keyboard with my hooves and yelled profanities at the creators of such monstrosity. How could they have done this? We should be better? Really? We should have been wiped out entirely, that's what should have happened!

"Farsight," Rose whispered, "it's not your fault. The ones that did this are already dead. There's nothing more you can do; and as far as I'm involved, I'm ashamed and sorry."

I looked at Rose, and felt a smile climb back to my face. I really appreciated her, even more now. The maturity she was showing, the way she actually cared about me, the firm principles that guided her. She was what I had failed to be, both in the Stable and out of it. Rose was pure gold, and I would have to keep her beside me, for my own sake.

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The rest of the trip through the Stable was easy in comparison to what we had been through. We left the office to head for the Maintenance Wing, which was across the Atrium to the Medical Wing, the direct opposite from where we had been through. Unlike the Quarters or the rest of the Stable, the Maintenance Wing wasn't soaking in blood and guts. It seemed like the killings had happened at night, when the ponies were sleeping. Every minute that passed we felt more and more uncomfortable in there.

It was easy to retrieve the talisman from its housing. A small hack to the water control terminal, one or two clicks, and the water flow to the rest of the Stable was cut. Another click, and the latches that held the terminal in place were unlocked. Carefully, both Rose and I lifted the shiny blue gemstone and placed it in one of my saddlebags. Then, as fast as we could, we left the place never to return again. I can't even describe the relief I felt when I saw the massive steel door close again, sealing the horror inside.

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The sun was rising again as we left the shack that hid Stable 173. I had never been so happy to see the arid, unforgiving Wasteland. Under the morning light, it was even more beautiful. We started walking down towards Freedom Field. Now that I had the Water Talisman with me, Metronome would have to set up a meeting with Dee Cleff, where I would explain my plan to the pony on top. There were many chances that my plan got tossed away, but at least I would have a shot.

I had come out of the Stable alive, even if battered and in pain. The effect of the painkillers Rose had given me was starting to wear out, and my busted knee was giving me hell in every step. Rose noticed my suffering and got close to me, helping me stay upright. Since we left the Stable, I felt like something had changed in her. Something in her eyes looked darker, as if a bit of her innocence had been stolen.

"Rose..." I muttered. "When you shot me... You remember anything?"

“Well... I thought I remembered nothing...” Rose didn’t look me in the eyes. She was feeling really ashamed of what she had done to me, or so it seemed. “But the truth is some images are coming to my mind. I remember seeing you flee, but everything looked warped. I was seeing all red, as if I was wearing some odd sunglasses. Then I remember shooting you.”

“What were you thinking?”

“I remember hearing her voice in my head. Talking about how nice it was to be friends with me, and how you had to die so she could come see me...” Rose sobbed and looked away with shame. “So sorry that I couldn't stop myself.” She sobbed again.

“Hey, hey. I know you couldn’t, and I forgive you for everything. Don’t worry, OK?”

“Thanks...” She looked at me with tears in her eyes and a big smile in her face. I smiled at her, feeling warm inside. I liked her, and I wanted her to be happy, since it made me feel good inside.

We kept walking in silence for about an hour or two. I scouted forward with my E.F.S. on and the rifle ready, while Rose trotted close to me, watching our back. I knew that, in the event of a fight, Rose wouldn’t be too capable of defending herself, but at least I had the help of my PipBuck in order to anticipate any attack. We returned to the landscape of ruins and wrecked buildings as we got closer to civilization.

“Why did we go to the Stable?” Rose asked suddenly.

“I told you. I had to find a Water Talisman.”

“No, no, that’s not what I was asking. There is a reason why you would want to find a Water Talisman. If you were looking for food or medicine, I’d understand, but a Water Talisman isn’t something you can use right away.”

I stood still, surprised. Rose was proving to be a very smart filly, always pointing out the right questions.

“I want something in return. After all, everypony does. And to obtain what I want, I need the Water Talisman.”

“And what do you want eventually?”

“Me? I want a better life... far from the Wasteland. And overall, I want justice for what was done to me.”

“The justice you enact for yourself isn’t justice. It’s revenge.”

“Then, I want revenge.” I looked at her in the eyes. I could feel her judging me, probably feeling disappointed for having believed in a pony that only wanted to cause more pain.

“Okay.” She smiled, catching me off guard. I wasn’t expecting that. “You’ll have your reasons. I think you’re a good pony, and if you want revenge, you’ll have your point.”

“Thanks for believing in me.” I smiled back at her. “And what about you? What do you want in life?”

“I have no big plans. I just want to do the right thing.”

The right thing. What a noble goal, and also difficult. Doing the right thing had cost me my life in the Stable. Maybe I should have warned her about the risks of that goal, about the endless pain of the defeat, the void feeling of being disrespected, the fear of retaliation. However, I didn’t. I wanted Rose to fight for what she believed in, since that seemed to drive her through the days. She deserved to have one shot at life, and I was nopony to take it away from her.

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We arrived at Freedom Field with the break of day. Metronome seemed pretty surprised when she saw me cross the door to the Music School. She seemed even more surprised when she saw me unload a water talisman from my saddlebags. And she seemed totally astonished when she saw little Desert Rose with me. I took surprises one and two as a fair warning, I was starting to think that she didn’t like me at all. After all, she had sent me on a true fool’s errand; and even if she couldn’t know what was wrong with Stable 173, she wanted me out of the picture.

However, I wouldn't go down that easily. I was back with her Water Talisman, so she would have to schedule a meeting with Dee Cleff, even if she didn't want to. On other facts, I think that Rose felt the initial chill between Metronome and me and immediately positioned herself beside me.

"Well, you made it after all." Metronome groaned, bored.

"It took me a while, but here I am." I smiled triumphantly. "Now, we should speak about the meeting."

"Not so fast, Farsight. I'll let you know when the meeting is set. It will be soon, I give you my word. First, I have to check everything with Miss Cleff."

"Okay." I nodded. I was feeling rather impatient, but I knew the best was to leave things as they were... for now.

"Good. Now you should take a rest, you seem to have had a bad time outside. I'll send Tender Cloud to heal you."

"Thanks, Metronome."

"LaRoche!" she called, and the black hulk I'd seen in the Tesla Bar appeared from a door on the side of the room. What the hell was going on here? "Would you please escort our guests to their rooms?"

"Oui, *mademoiselle* Metronome." LaRoche's voice was as I had pictured it, deep and dark. However, he spoke a funny Equestrian, which made him look less imposing. That's why he kept silent, or so I thought. While he came towards us, Metronome had turned around and was leaving the room, staging that our chat was effectively over.

"Follow me, *s'il vous plait*." LaRoche gently pointed towards the exit. For being a massive hulk, he seemed very polite and moderate. Life could be this surprising. But maybe I could use this to my advantage.

"LaRoche, weren't you working at the Tesla Bar?" I asked.

"*C'est vrai*. However, *Madame* Cleff and *Mademoiselle* Ampera reached an agreement yesterday. Now we're working together to ensure peace in Freedom Field."

"Say what?"

"*Madame* Cleff came to us with an offer we couldn't refuse: the guarantee of a monopoly in weapons and alcohol trade, plus a non-aggression pact for the future. My gang couldn't say no to such a juicy offer. Now that I remember, you're the one that came to us first, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"Yes, it was me." I couldn't help to smile softly. My plan, or at least part of it, was moving forward. Maybe my meeting with Dee could turn out useful. "Do you know if they spoke about something else?"

"No. *Désolé*. They didn't tell me anything else." LaRoche shrugged. "In fact, I don't think I should be telling you any of this. Now, let me take you to your rooms."

I wasn't getting anything more from our soft-speaking black friend, so I decided not to carry on. For some reason, no matter how gentle he could appear, I had the feeling that LaRoche could be merciless if he wanted to. We followed him up the stairs to the second floor of the building, where he took us to two rooms that lied one in front of the other. I saw Rose squee when she saw the big, comfortable bed; what made me crack a smile. Probably she hadn't seen such a bed in her entire life. Meanwhile, I opened the door and left my saddlebags on the floor. The loss of weight was a blessing for my injured knee, and the pain suddenly became much more bearable. I turned around and nodded to LaRoche, telling him to leave me alone, politely of course.

"Nurse Tender Cloud will be with you soon." LaRoche closed the door and I heard him go away from our rooms.

I took the armor off carefully and looked at myself in the mirror. Half my body had been covered in magical bandages, and most of them were stained with dried blood. Then, my knee had become numb, as if I had a wooden leg. At least I could walk, even if I had to stumble around a bit. I laughed at my sight, broken and pathetic. I was amazed about how I had changed over the days, and realized that I had been in the verge of

death so many times, that my former self would have fainted. I tried to have a peaceful life, but it seemed that peace evaded me. Suddenly, the door opened behind me.

“Mister Farsight, I’m here to... oh, my.”

I turned around, naked as I was, to see Tender Cloud, the small nurse mare that had healed me the first time, standing at the door, blushing. I smiled gently and looked at her with my eyes half closed.

“Don’t worry, honey; I won’t bite you. Come in.”

“Y-yes. Please, lie down...”

I obeyed, the gentle smile always in my face, even if my knee hurt. She started to go through my body, swiftly removing bandages and using her magic to heal the stitched wounds. He made me swallow a couple of healing potions while she worked on my knee. Her face of concentration was just lovely. After a couple of hours of hard work, my body was in an acceptable condition once again. She picked her things and turned around to leave, when I raised a hoof and touched her in the back.

“Don’t go yet, honey. Keep me warm.”

She turned around, blushing heavily. I raised from the bed and kissed her gently. She could have backed away, but she stayed and kissed me back. Then she giggled and got into bed. The fun had just been doubled.

#

Note: Quest Perk added.

Lavender Fields Forever: You have survived the horrors of Lavender. You gain 10% extra resistance to psychic conditioning. Also, your fears can’t beat you that easily.

## Chapter 5: Brothers In Arms

*“Good morning everypony, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I’m your favourite host, Mister New Pegasus, bringing you the best music in all the Wasteland! You enjoyed that, didn’t you? I surely did. Nothing beats the mesmerizing voice of Sweetie Belle. I wish I could wake up to her sweet melodies, don’t you agree? Well, I have another set of tunes ready for you, after this break! Don’t stop listening!*

*Let’s go with some news, shall we? It’s been a week since the despicable murder of Sandmound Ferratura, and things are starting to tighten in New Pegasus. Yesterday, the leader of the Ferratura family, old Novalis “Nonno” Ferratura accused Full House of the murder of his grandson. Obviously, it’s a pointless accusation since there is no proof of Full House having even left his casino. However, this reporter has done his homework. I’ve been digging deep into the underground of The Clops, speaking with both Ferratura family members and close affiliates.*

*According to them, Nonno Ferratura is old, and even if regarded with total respect, they stated that the mental abilities of the capo have been severely hindered over the years, so they don’t give the accusation any worth at all. However, they have told me that the main assumption they follow is that the murder of Sandmound wasn’t personal. It was business. They didn’t point any hooves at anypony, though.*

*The official response of the Platinum Horseshoe has been a firm denial of the accusation, showing their concern for what happened to the heir and offering their help to the family. On a less formal note, they let slip that Sandmound Ferratura had been seen outside New Pegasus, supposedly in the company of “unwanted” ponies. Rumor has it that young Ferratura was involved in the drug dealing business. The Ferratura family has, however, denied this aspect.*

*On the other hand, the New Pegasus Police Department has decided to keep silent as the investigation carries on. Chief Investigator Brass Badge hasn’t been seen at his home for days, and the front desk pony of the precinct told New Pegasus Radio that has been working 24/7 since the body was found, so hooves up for our diligent police force!*

*On to what is happening outside our city. It seems that the NER army has finally crossed the Divide and entered Neighvada territory. According to caravaneers and scrap traders along the Wasteland, the NER army has taken an old outpost along Route 15 to establish their HQ. The New Pegasus City Board has scheduled an emergency meeting to address this issue today at 7 pm. This radio station will keep you well informed of the movements of the Republican Army.*

*On a side note to this, the NER ambassador has decided to seclude herself inside the embassy building. How should we humble, peace-loving citizens interpret this?*

*And now that the news are over, let’s return to the music! As I promised, here’s another lovely, heart-warming tune by the one and only Sweetie Belle! Enjoy it as much as I do, and remember, everypony. You’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I’m Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

She was playing with my patience.

Metronome was delaying our meeting day after day. She would simply say her boss had more important matters to attend, matters like having her daily stroll through Trader Plaza, surrounded by her bodyguards. In the meantime, I was sent to my daily, pointless little assignments. One day I was overseeing a trade, the next day I would have to collect a debt from a late payer. The only good thing about it was that I was getting myself some caps, so my economy wasn’t as critical as it became when I headed for the Stable.

Every time I was on the verge of exploding, Rose was there for me. My young new friend knew how I thought, so she could easily talk to me and calm my anger. On the other hand, she was learning quickly about the ways of Freedom Field. In each and every assignment I was given, Rose would follow me into the thick of action. In a matter of days, she got to see both the big picture of the town and the small, nasty details.

I was amazed at Rose’s growth, mentally speaking. She was far more mature than a week ago, when I found

her in the ruins outside Freedom Field. When she learned about my situation, and about how I was no good, friendly neighbor, but more of a wannabe mobster; she immediately understood the situation and started asking me of my plans. For me and for her, since our fates were now bound by a tacit pact of mutual assistance. I didn't want to tell her much, apart from my desire to climb the ladder. She wouldn't have enough, though.

"Power?" Rose asked. "What's it good for?"

"What do you mean?" I replied. That question was totally pointless.

"Look at Dee Cleff. She's powerful, and yet miserable."

"Miserable? How can you say that?"

"Farsight, have you looked at her? Don't you see she lives in a gilded cage? She has to be protected all the time. She is looked upon with fear by all the population in Freedom Field. She can't do anything by herself! She isn't free! What's the point in being powerful if you can't be free?"

The question had its point, I had to admit that. I took a deep breath and started thinking carefully about my answer. In the days we had spent together, I had learned that Rose was a free spirit. She followed me because I had saved her, but she wouldn't just buy everything I sold. Instead, I began to have the feeling she tried to change me.

"Well..." I started slowly and calmly "Indeed, she's not as free as you can be. She's tied to some commitments, to her ideals and to her associates. However, the way I see it, I'm tied as well. I have my assignments, my allegiances... I'm not free, not powerful either. Dee isn't free, true, but she has the power to choose what she's tied to. And ultimately, she can break those ties, as long as she faces the consequences. I want that power."

"What do you want it for, then? To make money? To crush the rest of the ponies with your hoof? I've seen what you've had to do, and I found it horrible. I don't blame you, Farsight, I know you do it because you have to. I blame the powerful. I blame Dee."

"What do I want? I want the freedom I was denied from my very birth. I was born in a Stable, where you're assigned a job for your life, and you're expected to do it and shut up. If you raise your voice, you're kicked in your flank and left out to rot. Out here, I'm not free either. I have to work for any of the gangs if I want to survive. And out in the Wasteland, you're not free either, since you have to fight to survive. I want the freedom to choose my destiny."

Rose nodded silently. I hadn't convinced her, I was pretty sure about that. The best I could ever expect to do was to try to make her see the world through my eyes, to make her understand what drove me forward. This had been one of many discussions to come, there was no doubt about it.

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The day I was expecting had finally come. Metronome had told me to meet with them at noon in the Music Hall, where I would finally be able to explain my plan to them. The night before, I had spent hours rehearsing my speech. I had to be appealing and stern at the same time, both confident and humble, both seductive and logical. This one would be the hardest battle I had fought to the day, and I wouldn't be facing it from the safety of a cover spot looking through my rifle's sights.

With almost no hours of sleep and two cups of coffee down my throat to wake me up fully, I dressed my best (and only) suit and combed my mane thoroughly. If there was something I had learned in Freedom Field, it was the importance of a good first impression. If a thug wasn't imposing at a first glance, nopony would take him seriously, even if he was the deadliest bastard in the Wasteland. In this occasion, I had to transmit security and finesse.

Suit, check. Shower, check. Plan in mind, check. Breath mint, check. I breathed deep and pushed the door leading to the Music Hall, to find myself facing my two employers, Metronome and Dee Cleff. Metronome dressed as usual, always in black and white. This time, she had returned to the checkerboard pattern I had seen the first time. Dee was wearing a black suit, especially tailored for her, as it was a perfect fit. Once

again, I found myself comparing the image of Octavia in the background of the stage with the one of the gang leader, and they were really similar.

“You’re done checking Miss Cleff out?” Metronome asked smugly.

“Metronome, please.” Dee interrupted her with a soft, grating voice.

“I’m sorry, Miss Cleff.” I bowed gently. I didn’t want things to go rough from the very beginning. “I was, indeed, admiring the many similarities between Octavia and yourself.”

“It happens all the time.” Dee smiled. Hers was a sincere smile, or she was a perfect actress. “Indeed, I’m the great-great-great-whatever-daughter of the legendary Octavia.”

“Miss Cleff, please!” Metronome interrupted. “We have a schedule to attend.”

“Indeed. I’m sorry, Farsight. Metronome can be a bit harsh sometimes, but she tends to be right most of the times. Tell me. You had a plan you wanted to share with me, didn’t you?”

“Of course, Miss Cleff.” I cleared my throat. “Let me explain my reasons first, though. What drove me into all of this was the dire need of protection this city has. As you might remember, I started my life here as a scavenger-trader. We did meet in Trader Plaza some time ago. I sold you a little trinket, don’t you remember?”

“The RoboDoggy Winona, Miss Cleff.” Metronome added a bit of information.

“Yes, Metronome, I remember. Indeed, you were in the stand next to Sunny Orchard’s Vegetable Emporium.”

“Exactly. Now, the first day of job, I was seriously harassed by an addict. A junkie. A poor sod so high on Dash he couldn’t even link two words. I had a hard time dealing with him, and luckily for me, I suffered no injuries. However, the traders nearby told me that this has become more and more usual over the months. Therefore, I thought there was something to be done about the issue.”

“Yes, it’s a real disgrace.” Dee nodded, her face showing unmasked sadness.

“These being the reason, another thing sparked my curiosity. The junkie dropped a small object that put me on trail, concretely a playing card with the symbol of the Followers of the Shy on it. That led me to suspect an involvement of the Followers in the drug business.”

“You do know the Buckmares have the monopoly on drugs, don’t you?”

“I do. However, the Buckmares don’t have permission to MAKE drugs, do they?”

“No. Drug production is something we ruled out of Freedom Field in our last peace.”

“Well, keep that in mind, since I’ll return to it later. As I said, I set off to investigate the activity of the Buckmares. Since I was a rather unknown pony, I hoped to move unnoticed and eavesdrop something on their business. Luck was good to me, as I saw Saddle Buckmare himself leave the Diamonds and head for a meeting. I followed him to the dark alleys, where I hid in a dumpster. Some time later, I heard a conversation between Golden Swallow and Saddle Buckmare.”

“Did you record it?” Metronome asked. She knew I hadn’t, and she would probably use that fact against me.

“No, I couldn’t. However, before you rule out everything I say, take a minute to hear my story, please.”

“Carry on,” Dee said.

“Goldie and Saddle spoke about the status of their business. Apparently, they have started a joint venture in which Saddle floods Freedom Field with drugs and Goldie provides rehabilitation to the addicts. All for a low price, of course. In order to do that, Goldie demanded a greater production of drugs to Saddle. Therefore, Saddle Buckmare is producing drugs.”

“Which is intolerable.” Dee scowled.

“Indeed. Besides, there are other side effects, like the impoverishment of the population, since more and more ponies are pushed to addiction.”

“And if the population has no money, the trading will stop and our city will wither.” Dee’s reasoning was the one I wanted to point out.

“There was one more thing they mentioned. Saddle Buckmare wants to take you out of the picture, in case you didn’t know already. Then, well, I was caught snooping, and the rest is history.”

“I had that feeling.” Dee scowled again, graciously. “Thanks for all that information. However, all this doesn’t sound like a plan at all.”

“True, true. My plan goes as follows. What I heard let me know that the Coilites were the key to the domination of the City. A three against one scenario was what Saddle was trying to achieve in order to start a conflict, therefore, the first step would be to bring the Coilites to our side. That’s what I started to investigate before Metronome here sent me to find a Water Talisman. Upon my return, I saw that this step had already been taken.”

“It was very reasonable.” Dee smiled. “Metronome didn’t tell me it was your plan altogether.”

“She must have slipped that.” I gave Metronome an ironic smirk. “Not a problem, really. Now, the next step would be to force a negotiation with both our foes. Threaten them with an open conflict they can’t win.”

“You do know that I worked really hard to achieve peace, don’t you?” Dee was giving me a cold glare now. If looks could kill, I’d be lying dead on the floor right now.

“I know, I know.” I tried to give both of them my most convincing smile. “However, I don’t want to end up fighting the Buckmares or the Followers. I realize it would be bad for business. What I suggest is that we remind them of their situation, and tell them that we know about their little scheming. With that no longer a secret, give them two options. One: give in to our demands and stop the drug flow. How? Revoking the monopoly and turning the drug market into a free market. Two: be punished.”

“I fail to understand how a free market will stop the drug dealing.” Dee looked at me coldly, but with a hint of doubt in her face.

“It’s simple. A monopoly sets the price. It can be as low as Saddle Buckmare wants, thus enabling many ponies to buy it. And since he handles all the drugs coming from the Wasteland plus his production, the price of drugs can be really low. Besides, since he’s the only provider, he can lower the quality of the drugs without losing customers. If there was any other dealer offering a better quality material, the addicts would dump Buckmare and head to the other dealer. Besides, more dealers would mean more difficulty to obtain drugs to sell, which would mean higher prices. Eventually, the addict would have to pay more per shot.”

“So, in a nutshell, if there are more dealers, there’ll be less dealing?”

“More or less.”

“Do you think they’ll give in?”

“I don’t know, but I consider it’s worth a try.”

“All right.” Dee meditated for a second. “I’ll think it over. Now go, I have to discuss matters with Metronome.”

I nodded and turned around to leave. I peeked over my shoulder as I walked out of the Music Hall, and saw Dee and Metronome talking in whispers. If I had heard what they were talking about, I would have worried myself sick.

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The very next day to our meeting, Metronome summoned me to the Music Hall. Rose was invited as well. The fact that she wanted Rose to be around made me suspicious. Until then, all the assignments had been delivered only to me, and I was who decided to bring Rose with me. What did she want from the filly?

“So, Farsight, are you ready for another little quest?” Metronome seemed delighted while saying those words. Bad stuff. Metronome had never showed happiness or delight when speaking to me, so I was seeing black clouds in the horizon. In the very deep of my heart, I really wanted to give a smug retort, but my

experience had proven me that my big mouth could bring me even more trouble.

“Farsight is ALWAYS ready!” Rose jumped beside me. I hadn’t seen that coming. I knew that Rose appreciated me, but I never thought she’d jump forward so harshly.

“Rosie, I asked him. Be polite and let him answer.” Metronome gave a stern look to Rose.

“Don’t patronize me, Metronome.”

Whoa. Talk about being smug. Rose clearly did not realize the risks she was taking by speaking like that. If she knew, she would be a bit more careful.

“Rose, please.” I scowled. “You should watch your muzzle.”

Rose nodded and stopped bouncing.

“Metronome, I’m ready. What is it this time? Do you need me to find a lost city? Find the long-forgotten Tiara of Celestia? Retrieve Fluttershy’s dead carcass? Because I’m really good when it comes to finding impossible objects.”

Whoops. I had really let myself go this time, and I might face the consequences. Luckily, Metronome took the bravado as the joke and laughed, loosening the tension of the room.

“Yes, you’ve shown your prowess in digging deep into the Wasteland’s past.” Metronome chuckled, which gave me the creeps. “No, it’s nothing like that. I need you to clear a raider camp south of town.”

“A raider camp?” I replied. She was sending me to a certain death. No freaking doubt. “Do you seriously think I can take a whole raider camp by myself?”

“No, I know you can’t. I can’t think of anypony that can. That’s why I’m sending some... somepony with you, to help you out.”

“I can help him!” Rose bounced again.

“I don’t doubt you can, Rosie.” Metronome gave an amused look to the stubborn filly, who responded with a glare of childish hatred. “But this job needs another kind of help, different than the one you can give.”

Metronome stomped the stage floor three times and the door opened. Great sense of timing, indeed. If she wanted to impress anypony, at least she had caught Rose off guard. She looked at Metronome in utter amazement, as if she had pulled out some magic trick.

The door had opened, and a buck was entering the room. Wait a minute, I had seen this fellow before. Slick pinstripe suit, good taste in outfitting. Stone gray coat with a thin pinstripe motif, showing that he was no pony. The moustache and beard were the final proof. The zebra that had just entered the room was no unknown face to me. Mister Black and Mister Blue, back into action.

“Ah, Nadyr, welcome.” Metronome greeted the zebra with familiarity.

“Hullo, sweetie,” the zebra replied. His voice sounded exotic, the tone of her phrases being more a tune than a straight line.

“I-I-It’s a zebra!” Rose screamed, and ran to hide behind the seats.

“Half-zebra, if you please, young lady.” Nadyr didn’t seem very pleased with Rose stating the obvious.

“Well, well, well. If it isn’t my old partner Mister Black. Half-zebra? How is that possible?” I asked as politely as possible. If he was to be my partner, I had better be careful, since I already knew what he was capable of.

“Pa was a zebra, bro. Ma, on the other hand, was an earth pony. Of course, I never knew Pa. According to what Ma told me, he was one beautiful stranger. Y’know. Suave speaking zebra comes into town, walks into your place asking for a place to stay, since everypony hates him for being a zebra. Ma agrees, and by the time you know it, the slick stranger is tapping Ma’s flank like there’s no tomorrow. And in the morning he’s gone. And some time later I was born. Bad luck zebra traits are dominant. Poor Ma had to leave town in a hurry with me in the saddlebag.”

His story was another proof of the sad and unforgiving place Equestria had turn into. However, he seemed to have taken it with enough philosophy, since he didn't seem too angry at his unknown father. The only think I didn't like of Nadyr's speech was the explicitness of it. There was a filly listening.

"And yes," he continued, "I was Mister Black. And you were Mister Blue. Mind telling me your name?"

"Farsight, and this filly here is Rose." I said pointing my hoof at her.

"Mm-hmm. Great."

"Great indeed." Metronome interrupted. "Nadyr here grew to become a nice problem solver." She smiled at Nadyr. "He's worked with me a couple of times and I'm very fond of his services."

"My pleasure, sweetheart." Nadyr seemed to have kept the suave talking ways of his father.

"So, what is the job exactly about?" I asked, willing to get it over with. I didn't trust Metronome, and Nadyr wasn't the best companion either. Well, it was, as long as you didn't mess with him.

"There is a small village called Nobuck down south from here. It's about three days away, if you don't get hindered by beasts and such. The caravaneers have been having issues with a particularly aggressive band of raiders that has set up camp over there. Since those caravaneers are the ones that trade with me, I want you to take out the Raiders there."

"How many?" I asked.

"I don't know. The caravaneers couldn't count them."

"Known dangers?"

"Can't tell. Apparently they're well armed. And definitely dangerous."

Something was fishy about this job. Nadyr wasn't asking a single thing, as if the job was totally irrelevant to him, or as if he already knew what it was all about. Either way, I was on a disadvantage. However, it didn't seem like Metronome would tell me anything else, apart from the location of Nobuck, which was already beeping in my PipBuck.

"Anything more we have to know?" I asked curtly. "No? Good. Everypony, we're leaving."

I turned around and headed towards the exit. Rose bounced and followed me almost running. Nadyr, on the other hand, smiled and started strolling behind me. When we all left the building, I slammed the door shut, proving that I wasn't pleased. At all.

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The first day of our trip towards Nobuck went away without almost any news. Every now and then we had to fend off packs of radroaches or some big, nasty lizards called 'Gummys' according to Rose. Every now and then we had to go out guns blazing, but I never saw Nadyr get into combat stance. Not even a single time. What was he here for, anyway? I knew he was capable of fighting, damn straight I knew. Or at least it did look like that when we killed the couriers. Maybe he was nothing but a showoff, somepony that could only shoot a gun if his target was stopped and unarmed? I kept watching the zebra closely as we trod down the Wasteland, while Rose scouted the fields in front of us.

"So, what's your tale, bro?" Nadyr asked out of the blue. The fact that he entered the personal field so quickly was odd to me. In our last assignment, he hadn't told me a damn thing.

"Tale?" I replied.

"Tale, yes. Every single pony in the Wasteland has a tale to tell. Maybe before the War lives could be boring, but now every day is a story worth telling. My experience has shown me that. And I told you mine. Now it's fair trade that you tell me yours."

He had a point indeed. I guess it meant no harm if I told him about myself. However, I'd have to be careful not to speak about my plans.

"Well, I was born in Stable 188, right below the city of New Pegasus. I would have lived in peace there, but

they kicked me out.”

“Did they? That is so fucked up.” Nadyr whistled.

“Yeah. Totally fucked up. However, fucked up or not, the thing is I ended up stray in Freedom Field. They even kicked me off New Pegasus.”

“How nice.”

“You tell me. After that, I started to work as a trader and a scavenger. I could have carried on like that, but I started to investigate about the drug deals in town, and some gangsters caught me and were about to kill me, but the Stringers saved my sorry ass. Therefore, I had to start working for them in return.”

“And that’s when we met, ain’t it right?”

“More or less. In the meantime, I started thinking on a way of having my little revenge on the bastards that beat me up. So I asked for a meeting with Dee Cleff. And since Metronome didn’t want me sniffing around, she sent me to find a Water Talisman. Pretty much of a fool’s errand, but I ended up finding an abandoned Stable where a slaughter had taken place. After all the problems, I managed to come back with the gem. Yesterday I had my meeting, and today they’re sending me to hunt raiders with you.”

“Cool story, homie. What about the filly? She yours?” Nadyr seemed interested to know about me. I didn’t know whether to take it as something good or bad, but as long as he asked petty questions like these, I had no problem telling him the truth.

“You mean Rose? She comes with me, follows me since I saved her from some raiders who were about to rape her. Also, she almost killed me in the Stable.”

“Hell!” Nadyr laughed out loud, “she is troublesome indeed!”

I smiled and nodded. I didn’t know why, but even through all the distrust and dread Nadyr inspired me, I was starting to like the slick half-zebra, as he liked to be called. I knew he was a very dangerous bastard, but I enjoyed his boldness. He wasn’t afraid of calling things by their names.

We set up camp in a spark battery recharge station close to the main road. It seemed that before the war, the pegasi operated air chariots powered by spark batteries which could be refilled here. Now, it was nothing but a small rusted building in the middle of the desert. While we were getting ready to sleep, I took a peek at Nadyr’s gear. He only carried a small silenced pistol and a switchblade. A shiver ran down my spine when I realized what was going on. Those weren’t the weapons to fight a gang of raiders. Nadyr wasn’t here to help me take out the raiders, he was here to kill me! However, we had been alone for a lot of time, only the three of us. Why hadn’t he attacked yet?

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Luna be praised. Nadyr snored like an adult Ursa Major. Even if that wasn’t the best setting to get some rest, at least I knew he wouldn’t kill me in his sleep. While I looked at my PipBuck screen and watched the clock count the minutes, realization struck me. Of course he hadn’t attacked me. Rose never got out of our line of sight! He couldn’t kill her. Probably, even if Metronome wanted her to come with me, our striped companion was incapable of taking a harmless filly out. I assumed that her plan was to have Rose and I taken out while investigating the raider camp, mission from which we weren’t expected to return.

I could have killed Nadyr at the spot, but I saw the chance to obtain a powerful ally for my interests, and take one of the Stringers’ best soldiers off their clutches at the same time. If I played my cards well, this mission could be a total success... for me, at least.

The sun raised again and we started our second day of journey through the desert. Once Rose had gained a little distance from us, I trotted close to Nadyr and readied my rifle, in case things went ugly. But before, I’d try to talk my way out of the situation.

“How much will she pay you, Nadyr?” I asked.

“What?” Nadyr was caught off guard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, bro.”

“Come on, Nadyr, don’t play fool on me. I know Metronome hired you to kill me.”

“No, no, no, bro. You must be confused by the heat or something. Metronome hired me as your partner.”

“What partner brings a silenced small caliber pistol and a switchblade to a raider hunt? Even Rose is packing more heat than you!”

Beat that, buster; I thought. Nadyr didn’t speak, he seemed to be analyzing his possibilities. He saw me on guard, with my rifle ready to shoot, and fully aware of the situation. To be totally honest, I feared that he would pull some zebra trick on me. And he did, up to some point. In an acrobatic movement, Nadyr somersaulted and bucked me with his powerful hind legs, sending me flying to the floor. The force of the impact broke my grasping spell, and the rifle flew away from my area of control. I landed on the dusty tarmac with a painful impact in my back.

I got up as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, Nadyr had taken his silenced pistol from its holster. I had no single minute to lose, or he’d spray my brains on the floor. I galloped forward and rammed him. As he wasn’t ready for impact, he didn’t offer any resistance and fell to the floor. Our legs tangled and I fell headfirst to the floor. Then I started regretting not having trained my hoof-to-hoof combat. Nadyr was quicker to get up, and he pinned me in some sort of martial arts maneuver, pressing his weight on my neck and blocking my throat.

I couldn’t breathe. My heart was pounding ever faster, and a lacerating pain was forming in my chest, as if a ball of spikes had started growing in my lungs. If things didn’t change fast, I’d lose consciousness fast. I tried to roll around, but he had me pinned down. I tried to buck him, but then again, I couldn’t drive force into my hooves. Then I realized that I could grasp things, and I used my magic on something any male pony or zebra would hold dear.

It was a nasty move, I recognize it, but I had to survive. My horn glowed, and Nadyr squeaked. With a leap, he released the pin and let me roll around and gasp for air. However, before I could even raise my head, a hoof slammed against my belly, making me twist in pain. I almost couldn’t see and I breathed with great distress, and Nadyr knew it. He kept aiming for my lungs, trying to knock me out cold by punching all the air out of them.

Every impact felt like falling off a cliff. Nadyr was able to send his hooves right into my soft spots, kicking the air out of my lungs. I tried to block the zebra’s hooves, but I was too slow. I was being pummeled from side to side without any chance of a comeback. I just needed a second of rest to be able to back away from Nadyr’s impact range. However, an expert fighter like my opponent wouldn’t give me that choice. Just to make the point clear, Nadyr somersaulted and bucked me in the face at full strength.

That last kick had thrown me close to my rifle, thank Celestia. My only edge over Nadyr was my magic, so I would have to use it wisely. With almost no time to think, the half-zebra was back on me, stomping against my chest, sending pain through my body. This time, however, I had an ace up my sleeve. Without him noticing, I used my magic on the rifle. Just a second, enough to propel it from the floor and into his head.

**SLAM!**

The wooden hilt of the rifle rammed against Nadyr’s head, making him stumble and break the pin. Not enough. I fight to get up while I sent the rifle slamming into his head once again. This time the zebra lost balance and fell to the floor. This time was the good time. Before he could react, I had aimed the rifle right at his face, ready to shoot him down.

“Game over, Nadyr!” I gasped.

Nadyr raised his hooves and composed a guilty smile. He was bleeding from some cuts and his slick suit looked less imposing once dirty and ragged. My body hurt like hell, so I supposed I had the same look.

“Okay, bro. You got me. Miss Cleff wants you two dead, both you and the little filly. She thinks you are dangerous for her. So she hired me to take you out, no witnesses. But as long as we keep moving down the road, I couldn’t risk to attract a patrol or a caravaner. That’s why I haven’t killed you yet. But whatever, now I’m done for. So, you can shoot me now, ‘kay?”

I was seconds away from pulling the trigger and blowing his brains off, but something stopped me. The

sound of hooves coming close. The sound of rattling guns, the sound of an army. What the fuck?

“Okay, foals. Enough playing around.” A stallion said sternly. I looked up to see a bunch of armored bucks with their battle saddles menacingly pointed at us. Rose was standing in front of them, with an embarrassed expression on her face. “Now, lay down your guns and start walking here, no funny moves.”

“Rose...” I gasped, still trying to pump oxygen into my lungs. “Did you... bring them... to us?”

“I’m afraid I did that... I’m sorry.” Rose stepped back, worried. “I was scouting ahead and they surprised me. I never saw them coming.”

I left the rifle on the floor and moved to the side, letting Nadyr get up again. The pistol and the switchblade fell on the dirt with a thudding noise. The bucks had already surrounded us, and one of them picked our weapons from the floor and lodged them in his saddlebags. The ones behind us poked us with their heads, forcing us to start a march.

I had seen enough. Indeed, the ponies escorting us weren’t raiders. They moved in formation, their armors new and polished. Their weapons weren’t old makeshift rifles, but powerful saddle-mounted contraptions with double machine guns. Even if they all tried to cover themselves with old, dusty coats, I could see their badges. That emblem wasn’t new for me. The two unicorn heads. Those ponies were NER soldiers!

And if the situation wasn’t hard enough, there was Nadyr. After having realized the zebra wanted to kill me, I hardly couldn’t trust him. I had spared his life where I had all the reasons in the world to kill him, but I wasn’t sure at all about his loyalty. It seemed that he didn’t trust me either. However, our new situation needed a desperate basis of agreement between the two of us. I decided to make a move.

“I have a proposal to make to you, Nadyr. I could use your help.”

Nadyr looked at me with a pissed face. He had been battered around, and now he was captive to the NER thanks to Rose. He had his reasons to be mad at me.

“Tell me.” Even under pressure, he kept being slick.

“We got into this together, and we’ll get out of this together, no matter what we have to do.”

“Give me a good reason.”

“I fucking spared your life.” I clenched my teeth in rage. Was he mocking me or something?

“Like that’s something. Your filly got us into bigger trouble, so you’re responsible after all.”

“And I’m going to get us out of trouble, but I will need your help. I will need you to stick to my version, and I will need you to back me up, should the situation come. What is it you want in return?”

“Come on, smarty pants. Guess.”

“Do you think it’s time for jokes, Nadyr? These guys are serious. Haven’t you noticed that Dee sent us directly to a trap?”

“Whatever. I don’t care, traps are part of my job, and I know my way out of them. You, on the other hand, seem very worried, so I’m going to take a wild guess here and say you have no fucking idea on how you’re getting out of this mess. That’s why you’re asking for help. And I say, give me a reason.”

Crap. I sighed. I was caught in a situation that was starting to kill my patience. I needed Nadyr to get us out of this one, but I had to keep my dignity.

On a second thought, screw dignity.

“All right, Nadyr. What is it that you want?”

“Money. I want money. After all, I’m a mercenary.”

“You want money? That is all? All right, let’s talk about money. We work together and share our earnings. Partners. Associates. Does that sound good to you?”

“What?”

“Nadyr! I said we share earnings. We happy?”

Nadyr smiled broadly and nodded.

“Yeah. We happy.”

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Heat burnt our backs as we trotted uphill, heading for our destination, with the guns of the NER troopers aimed at our backs. The hill wasn't too steep, but it took us some effort to arrive to the top, since we hadn't stopped to rest for the night. We looked along the road, and to our amazement, a massive building on the shape of a green, toothless lizard with big purple eyes looked at us from the other side.

“What the fuck is this thing?” Nadyr stuttered in utter surprise. “Where the fuck are these nutters taking us to, Farsight?”

“Quit swearing around, Nadyr, and keep your voice down. I have no idea either.”

“What is this place?” I asked out loud.

“Shut up. You don't need to know what this place is.”

I smiled to my inside. Not telling me where we were had only one obvious significance. The NER didn't want us to know where we were headed. Therefore, our destination had to be some sort of secret NER encampment. However, that didn't answer my question. Something else did.

*\*BLEEP!\** The PipBuck came alive once again, and I managed to take a peek without causing any suspicions on the troopers that escorted us. The text on the screen was very clear: *You have reached Nobuck*. Our original destination, and the place where, according to Metronome, some Raiders had established camp. Well, it turned out they weren't Raiders.

But, what was their business in Nobuck? And why didn't they openly claim their position?

“Okay, you three!” The voice of the commanding officer echoed in the Wasteland air. “We're close to our destination, so prepare to be shackled!”

“Shackled?” Nadyr yelled. “How about no?”

“Nadyr, don't make it any harder.” I held Nadyr close with my hoof. “We don't know how they'll take it.”

“You're a reasonable buck.” The trooper in front of me turned around with a gentle smile on his face and a little gun floating beside him. “Of course, we're not going to shackle you as is. We don't want to get hurt in the process. This will make things easier.”

The gun fired silently, and I felt something sting me in the foreleg. I quickly looked to see a small dart lodged in my flesh, and then I felt dizzy. Everything went black in the blink of an eye.

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“Are they awake?” A voice shouted, yet muffled, as if it were far away.

“The zebra is awake, sir. The adult unicorn is still dozing around, it seems.” Another voice responded, far away as well.

“Wake the unicorn. She'll be here any minute.”

“Right now, sir!”

A blast of water came out of the blue, breaking me out of the trance I was in. I opened the eyes, just to be blinded by the light coming out of a lamp pointed at my face. I closed the eyes again and shook my head. I was shackled to the floor, so I couldn't move my hooves. The lamp was moved away, so I could open my eyes again and look at the place I was in.

We were in what seemed the room of an old motel. Nadyr was shackled beside me, close to an old dusty bed with a ragged cover on it. The wallpaper had almost lost all its color, and dust floated all around the place. Three heavily armed soldiers wearing NER uniforms watched us. Our saddlebags had been left on the bed,

but there was no trace of our weapons. The soldiers had stripped me of the upper half of my armor. At least, my hind legs were covered.

“What were you doing here?” One of the ponies, who seemed to be the leader of the team, spat the question.

“Sightseeing.” Nadyr answered.

“Sightseeing, with guns?” the leader replied, smirking curtly.

“It’s a dangerous neighborhood, officer.” Nadyr smiled back.

“Shut the fuck up, you striped bastard!” One of the soldiers lost his temper, and pointed his rifle towards Nadyr.

“Weapons down, private! Wait until she questions them!”

The soldier obeyed but gave Nadyr a menacing glare. The half-zebra replied with a wink and a kiss, which infuriated the NER soldier even more. The team leader had to issue a curt shout to force his teammate to stand down.

“You harm him, Private Evenstar, and I swear that I’ll make you eat your Cutie Mark!”

“Yessir!”

Minutes passed as we were waiting for some unknown mare to come question us. Who did they think we were, actually? We were nothing but two Wastelanders that had fallen into a trap, operated by this NER detachment. They wouldn’t obtain much information from us, mostly because we had none to give them.

“Where is Rose?” I asked to the leader.

“Who?”

“The small filly that came with us. Where is she?”

“She’s under custody. Don’t worry, she has suffered no harm. I strictly ordered she should be treated with respect.”

“Thank you.” I liked him. Even if he was holding us captive, he was better than most of the ponies I had come across in the wastes.

The day kept advancing as we waited for our mysterious guest to arrive. I grew ever more impatient as time went by. Nadyr, on the other hand, seemed to have slipped to his inner world, as he was looking nowhere and whistling a tune. Suddenly, the sound of hooves stomping the floor came from the outside. Something was about to happen. The door opened and the team leader shouted.

“Third group, salute!”

The three soldiers martially raised a hoof to their eyebrows, as a green unicorn mare with a green and white mane entered the room slowly. She wore a dark green formal suit with a white blouse inside, and on the flap of her jacket she had pinned a golden insignia of the two unicorn heads. She was some important pony within the NER.

“So, seems like we caught something in our net, doesn’t it?” She smiled dangerously. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

“Whoa, whoa, lady!” Nadyr smiled again, trying to look seductive. “How impolite of you, coming into the room where we’re being held and asking our names without even telling us yours...”

One of the soldiers advanced to beat Nadyr up, but the mare lifted a hoof to stop him.

“I like your guts, striped abomination.” She smiled again. “I am Harpsong Heartstrings, Vice-President of the New Equestrian Republic, and I didn’t cross the damn Divide putting my life at risk to be sweet-talked by some underling like you!”

So we were messing with the big fish. This was too dangerous for Nadyr’s loud mouth to handle. Besides, I still didn’t trust him enough to let him put my life in danger. I decided to give a polite reply instead.

“I am Farsight, miss Vice-President. And this one here is my companion Nadyr, a half-zebra. You probably will have met my protégé Rose before.”

I bowed in order to show a bit more of respect, since she struck me like a pompous megalomaniac. I could play with those cards, if things went right.

“What is your business here in Nobuck?” she demanded.

“We come from Freedom Field. We were sent to investigate the activity around town, since we had reports of caravans being attacked close to the area. We didn’t know you were here.”

“Of course you didn’t. You weren’t meant to. That’s why we’ve been scaring caravaneers away from town, to avoid letting the ponies know we made it this far.”

“Hm. Well, now that you’re going to kill us, you could anyway tell us your great plans.”

I smiled. It was a nasty one, but if she was as dimwitted as I thought, she would bite. And she did.

“We want to control the Neighvada territory, isn’t it obvious?” She smirked again, looking at me as if I was plain dumb. “And we will settle in New Pegasus if necessary. However, we can’t make it into the city easily.”

Bingo, baby. I had her right where I wanted to. I was looking for a way to wipe Dee Cleff out, and she gave me the NER.

“I can give you Freedom Field.”

“Yeah, and I’m Princess Celestia herself. Don’t try to play with me, you lousy mobster fuck. You can’t do anything. You can’t even keep your team under control. The striped underling keeps yakking about shit and whatnot and the filly can’t hide properly. So don’t speak to me about controlling towns.”

“But...” I couldn’t even use my wits against her. She was so narrow minded that I couldn’t even fancy talk her. I had been defeated... by a dimwit. I wanted to rip my head off with a facehoof.

“All right. I want these spies executed at once!” Harpsong yelled.

“Now, now, miss Vice-President.” Nadyr started talking softly. “My friend here tends to think a bit out of the box sometimes. Let me explain. We’re mercenaries. We work for caps, so our allegiances are towards the pony with the juiciest pouch. I’m going to take a wild guess here and say that would be you.”

I was starting to see where Nadyr was trying to go. Since Harpsong was so... simple, a simpler approach was the best way out of this situation. And after all the pains Dee and Metronome had put me through, it wasn’t that bad to switch sides.

“Carry on.” Harpsong looked interested.

“Well, it’s true that we were working for the gangs in Freedom Field, but honestly, the pay was crap. And I can count three powerful reasons to drop their contract: one, two, and three.” Nadyr was referring to the rifles pointed at us.

“Now, what my slick companion is saying...” I added with my best smile “is that we owe nothing to the gangs in Freedom Field, and that we would gladly offer our services to the NER, provided you let us live, of course.”

“Look at the goons, begging for their lives!” Harpsong laughed loudly. “And what services can you provide me?”

“We take great pride in our skills as saboteurs.” Nadyr hummed. “Skills that could come in really handy if you want to take Neighvada.”

“Saboteurs? What are your skills?”

“Well, I’m one sneaky bastard, silent and deadly.” Nadyr smiled maliciously. “And my companion here is a crack sniper.”

“What about the filly?”

“She’s a healer. And she can defend herself.” I shivered when I remembered the pain of my knee bursting. For being her first shot, Rose had been very accurate.

“Interesting...” Harpsong mumbled. “We’ll have to test you before letting you in.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Nadyr nodded with a smile.

“Unshackle them and give them their weapons back!” she ordered. “Let’s see what you’re capable of.”

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My test was what I had expected it to be. I was driven to a makeshift firing range in the outskirts of Nobuck. The NER troopers had placed series of targets at different distances. Most of the targets were tin cans, but there were some ponylike contraptions scattered around the field.

“OK.” An NER drill instructor gave me back my rifle. It was unloaded. “Now, the test is simple. We’ll give you five minutes. Load your rifle and show us what you’ve got. And don’t try anything funny, or we’ll mow you down. Understood?”

I nodded, concentrating on the task before me. Five minutes wasn’t that much time, but I had S.A.T.S. on my side to take the hardest shots. After all, this was not that different to the training I had been doing back in Freedom Field. The only minor detail was that my life was on the line.

“Ready?” the drill instructor roared. “GO! GO! GO!”

I took a deep breath and started loading bullets into the rifle. One... two... three... four... five... six... seven... eight... nine... ten. Ready to go. I floated my rifle close and aimed for the nearest targets, a row of cans. Middle distance, steady target. No wind. Easy stuff.

**BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!**

The cans were hurled off their position by the force of the bullets, and I moved to the ponylike contraption behind. This time, the distance was something I couldn’t disregard. When trying long shots in training, I had discovered that the bullets tended to go a little bit low, so I’d have to aim a bit higher.

**BLAM!**

Damn it. Too high.

**BLAM!**

Crap. Too low.

“Four minutes!” he yelled.

Fuck. Still many targets to go. I had to act faster, since I couldn’t activate S.A.T.S. yet. The cooldown time wouldn’t let me fire it again in four minutes.

**BLAM!**

Headshot! Off to another row of cans. These ones were really, really far. However, I still could see them through my sights, so I could try to shoot them without any aid. Provided I could calibrate the sights properly. At these distances, I would really have loved to have a scope mounted to my gun.

**BLAM!**

Wide and high. Shit. There was a slight breeze that might be deflecting the bullet. I needed to aim better, quickly!

**BLAM! BLAM!**

Two shots, two misses. Now I was starting to get nervous.

“Two minutes remaining!” the instructor yelled. Thank you, Celestia, fucking thank you very fucking much.

**BLAM!**

The first can flew as it got hit by the bullet. Fuck yeah. I had found the right calibration, but now I had to reload. One... Two... Three... Four... Five...

“One minute left!”

Fuck! Faster! SixSevenEightNineTen! Done! Now what? Oh, yes, the rest of the cans!

**BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!**

The cans were blasted out of their position. Now I had only one target left, but it was so far away I could barely see it.

“Thirty seconds!”

Right, time to play my last card. I activated S.A.T.S. and watched the world distort, time slowing close to a stop and space curling itself to show me the target. Another ponylike contraption made out of wood. The accuracy indicator showed a rather discouraging 26 percent of hitting chance, but I had to try it. My life was depending on a bullet.

**BLAM!**

“Time’s over!” the drill instructor roared. “Private, go check that last target!”

I dropped the rifle, since my nerves didn’t even allow me to keep the grasping spell running. Had I hit the target? Please, Goddesses. Please.

“Target hit, sir!” The voice of the private echoed across the field.

“Well, what do you know?” the instructor turned to me with a smile. “You are, indeed, a crack sniper. The New Equestrian Republic could use the likes of you. Why don’t you just enlist in our Army?”

“Sorry, sir. I have other plans in mind.” I smiled back, but made my point clear.

I saw Nadyr and Rose coming up the road, followed by Harpsong and a bunch of NER troopers. While they were getting close, Harpsong looked at me, then at the instructor, and I saw him nod in the corner of my eye. When they got close, Harpsong extended a hoof to me. I immediately deduced that Nadyr and Rose had passed their tests. With a smile of relief, I shook her hoof.

“Welcome to the NER, gentlemen. It’s good to have you with us!”

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“So, now that we’re all friends, let me ask you something. How did you know we were coming?” I had a hunch about the big lizard building, but I wanted to be sure.

“See that building over there?” Harpsong waved a hoof towards the lizard. “That’s the Gummy building, formerly a Hub for the Ministry of Morale. Now, it’s our main headquarters in the South New Pegasus area. We have a sniper stationed in its mouth. Saw you coming down the road, even before you climbed the hill. Then, your little friend got separated from you two, and we sent a patrol to poach her. It was easy.”

I looked at Rose, who smiled and blushed. Aw, what the hell. I couldn’t blame her.

“Gummy? Ain’t that the name of them nasty lizards?” Nadyr asked.

“Yes.” Rose replied in a teacher-like tone. “Those big lizards are gummies. You have blue gummies, green gummies, fire gummies and golden gummies. The hides of the golden gummies are really expensive! But they’re not easy to hunt...”

“Yeah, they’re some disgusting motherfuckers, but they’re called geckos, honey.” Harpsong nodded. “I remember that a bunch of them scaly bastards laid an ambush to a echelon of scouts. We lost one good pony to some lizards.”

“So why the name?” I asked. “Those gummies, or geckos, look like something that evolved thanks to radiation.”

Harpsong stopped and looked at me with a smirk on her face.

“I might have misjudged you, being a Stable pony and all that. I thought your plans were a bluff, but now that I hear you, I’m starting to realize there are some brains in that head!”

“Glad to hear it, Vice-President.” I bowed. “But you haven’t answered my question.”

“True. Gummy was the pet of the Mare of the Ministry of Morale, Pinkie Pie. A toothless alligator, can you believe it?”

“Better times. Better times.” Nadyr shook his head and shrugged.

“Indeed.” Harpsong nodded.

Without saying anything more, Harpsong turned around and entered the Gummy building through a door in the tail of the alligator. We followed her inside to see what looked like a fully functioning war room. Maps of the area and photographs of given elements, such as the City of New Pegasus or the place where we stood, Nobuck, covered the walls. Beneath them, we could see the remains of some old posters with the face of a mare with a curly mane. The legend in the poster read: ‘PINKIE PIE IS WATCHING YOU... FOREVER!’. A bit too drastic if you asked me. But those were different times. Times of war.

Harpsong trotted up to a table where a map had been nailed to. I neared to see that the map pictured the whole south of the Neighvada Territory, the City of New Pegasus lying in the middle of it. A small NER token stood over the point that represented Nobuck. That was our emplacement. Down to the southwest, a big NER chip with the two unicorn head emblem was stationed close to a mountain pass that exited the map.

“I reckon this is Nobuck.” I pointed a hoof at the small token, then moved it towards the big chip. “What is this exactly?”

“That’s our main emplacement. Divide Pass. The entire 1st Army of the New Equestrian Republic is stationed there.”

“Isn’t it a bit too risky, telling us where you are?” I asked.

“I don’t give a single fuck.” Harpsong boasted. “What’s the biggest army you can build up in this Celestia-forsaken dustbowl? It has nothing to do against our military might!”

She sure was a loudmouth. My experience told me that being so aggressive could cost you a great deal in the Wasteland. Maybe the NER was different, but I couldn’t avoid proving her wrong.

“But you are afraid of something. You don’t deploy an entire army if you don’t want to defend from somepony.”

Harpsong Heartstrings froze. I had mentioned something she didn’t like to hear about, and was trying to figure out a way to come out of the situation in a honorable manner.

“That’s enough chatter. From now on, you’ll work on a need-to-know basis. And that you don’t need to know.” Harpsong’s defensive stance let me know I hadn’t missed my shot. “Even if you seem to be some worthwhile agents, I need to test your skills on real combat.” She returned to the map and pointed to a small village further down the road. “This place is called Pipton. It’s a small village, just a couple of houses and a crossroads, but there is a bunch of prison escapees hidden there. They assaulted a weapons caravan coming from Divide Pass to Nobuck, so now they’ll be well armed, and mean a serious threat to the safety of the NER. I want you to take them out.”

So, we were hunting raiders after all.

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We were hunting raiders, and we were not on our own. Harpsong had had the deference of sending some NER troopers along. Actually, she sent the group of soldiers that had been keeping us captive in the motel until her arrival. Three stallions clad in heavy plate armor, marching at a speedy trot, just as if they were staging a military parade. That was what I called a raider magnet.

“Hey!” I called. “You know that you aren’t inconspicuous, don’t you?”

“You just said?” the leader answered. He had introduced himself as Sergeant Sunlight Forger, a fiery orange

colored buck with a very short red and gold mane. He was equipped with a double-barreled machine gun contraption mounted on his back. The technical name to it was “battle saddle”. Yes, why not. It was reasonable.

“I said you’re not caring much about revealing our position. Not the wisest of choices in the Wasteland.” I replied.

“What mister Brightfuck here is saying has a point.” Nadyr added. Why, he didn’t like me all that much, did he? “Out here, you either lay low or get your flanks nailed.”

“You said what, you dickhead?” One of the other two soldiers, an indigo buck with a star on his flank, roared at Nadyr. His rocket launcher battle saddle pointed menacingly at us.

“Private Evenstar!” Forger yelled. “I’ve had enough of your insubordination!”

“Yessir...” Evenstar gulped. All bark and no bite.

“Sergeant, if I might...” The third NER trooper asked, respectfully.

“Speak up, Carrots.”

“I believe Farsight is right, sir. This ain’t no regular war. We’re fighting guerrilla style here, so we should adapt to the terrain.”

Sunlight Forger meditated at the brick-colored buck’s suggestion. Reasonable a pony as he appeared to be, he would probably take it into account.

“Alright, bucks, this is what we’ll do. Gather dust and sand and scrape it all over our armors. We need to hide our NER distinctives.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Carrots and Evenstar nodded, and all three of them started rolling on the floor and hurling balls of sand at themselves.

“Lookie there,” Nadyr laughed mildly, “don’t they act like little foals?”

“Nadyr, it’d be wise not to piss them off too much.” I gave the half-zebra a stern look, which made him stop grinning and look back at me almost as sternly.

“What’s wrong, Blindsight?” he mocked. “Afraid of the three stooges?”

“The three stooges have enough firepower to turn us into mincemeat!” I roared at Nadyr. “So shut the fuck up and obey!”

“You are asking for another beating.” Nadyr said cuttingly.

“You two! cut it out!” Rose jumped between us. “You’re supposed to cooperate.”

“Yeah, that’s OK.” I smiled at her. “Sorry, Nadyr. Let’s keep things professional between us. I know you don’t like me, and I can’t trust you too much yet, but let’s cut us some slack.” I looked at the troopers. “Okay, guys. That’s enough. Besides, it’s not like infiltration is your way in, is it?” I pointed at the battle saddles.

“Exactly!” Evenstar boasted. “My friends Omayya and Kaboom here don’t like to be silent when they can bring on the noise!” He had given names to the rocket launchers of his battle saddle? What a nutter.

“Keep it down, Evenstar.” Forger said curtly. “We’re already close to Pipton, and we don’t want everypony there to notice us.”

Evenstar stopped talking. Indeed, the small village could be seen in the horizon, and an old billboard close to the road welcomed us to lovely, sunny Pipton, where everypony was welcome. Well, probably not anymore.

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“Evenstar, Carrots, with me. We take the East entrance and drive them westward with our firepower.”

Sunlight Forger gave orders to all of us. It felt strange not to be in charge anymore, but it didn’t hurt my pride or anything like that. I understood that it was what it had to be done in order to achieve further goals.

“Farsight, you and your team will enter from the North. We need to force them to head for Divide Pass. That,

if we don't wipe them out completely.”

The plan was robust and simple, a nice example of tactical thought. Pipton was a small town built around a t-shaped crossroads, the junction of two roads, one that traversed the town from east to west, heading towards Divide Pass and the main NER base, and the other one that came from the north, that is, from Nobuck. In other words, right where we were now. Most houses were built from wood and sheet metal, since the pre-War buildings were probably hit by some stray missile headed for Las Pegasus that didn't reach its destination. Time and bandits had done the rest.

Forger's team was already out of our sight when we headed towards the first buildings of Pipton. My E.F.S. could track the three friendly NER troopers, as long as a great number of hostiles. I could count over twenty. I lifted a hoof to catch Nadyr and Rose's attention, and drew them closer.

“Hostiles, around twenty of them. Watch out. Rose, I want you to stay on the back and heal us if necessary. Nadyr, infiltration. I don't want to bring all the attention towards us, but that house over there is a great vantage point to pick targets one by one.” I pointed my hoof towards a three-storey house close to the crossroads. “Do you think we could sneak in there?”

“Sheee-it, bro! That's piece of cake for this half-zebra!” Nadyr grinned.

“Well let's get down to business.”

Rose hid herself behind some bushes and readied her small black pistol. Once she was good to go, she nodded and I followed Nadyr through the back alleys of Pipton, towards our chosen spot.

### **KA-BOOM!**

Evenstar's rocket launcher made clear why he had called it like that. A huge explosion rocked the entire village and chaos followed. Raiders clad on armors made from traffic signals and tyres started to run all around the streets, firing blindly at the NER troopers. On the other hand, Forger's ponies were deploying a true barrage of fire across Pipton's main street.

We arrived at the rear door of the house we wanted to enter, and Nadyr picked a bobby pin from his mane. Holding it in his mouth, Nadyr started picking the lock, which opened itself rather quickly, doing a gentle click. The half-zebra led the way, his silenced pistol tightly held in his teeth. I followed him, readying my rifle. On the second floor, a raider was shot dead by Nadyr before he even got to notice that we were behind him. When we climbed to the top floor, we saw a sniper unicorn mare aiming through the window I had chosen as a vantage point. Nadyr was closing on her with his switchblade ready, but he stepped on a creaky plank, giving his position away. The mare turned around swiftly, holding a pistol in her mouth, aimed at the half-zebra.

### **BLAM!**

That's why I loved hollow rounds. The bullet from my rifle entered right between the eyes of the mare leaving a small hole, but it came out from behind as if a cannonball had blasted her brains open.

“Thanks!” Nadyr sighed, “she almost got me there. Hey! I can see her thoughts from here!”

I didn't pay attention to Nadyr's corny joke and walked to the sniper rifle on the window. It was a great rifle indeed, new and shiny, with a powerful scope attached and a bipod on the front side to reduce the recoil. I thought I might as well give it a try.

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There were only eight hostiles left, but they were well entrenched behind a smoking cart and some crates. That was the NER caravan, and if my hunch was correct, it was spellbound to protect it from enemy fire. Because of that, Sunlight Forger's team had fallen into a stalemate with the remaining raiders. However, the raiders weren't aware that their sniper had had her brains turned into red goo, and that the new sniper wasn't friendly but hostile.

“Stand still, you wanker...” I grumbled as I tried to fix the aim of the sniper rifle on the head of one of the raiders, a particularly nasty looking earth pony with no ears.

**BLAM!**

One shot, one kill. The raider went down like struck by lightning, sprinkling his comrades with a drizzle of his blood. I realized I wasn't using S.A.T.S. at all! That sniper rifle was a magnificent weapon, very finely tuned. I guess it came from the gun caravan the raiders attacked.

Another raider came into my sights. He was checking where his companion had been hit and where the attack came from, and in order to make a tough shot, he kept moving nervously up and down the cover. I decided to add a bit of technology to the mix by activating my targeting system, and took a deep breath as the world stopped turning. The nervous raider moved sluggishly now, and the sounds came muffled to my ears. I could feel my heartbeat rhythmically pounding my chest, giving me a notion of time. The crosshairs of the scope met the eye of the raider, and I pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

Another hostile down, this time with a funny backward somersault, courtesy of my bullet. The rest of the raiders noticed that someone was gunning them down from the tall building, so they responded with a kind shower of bullets, which forced me to back away and look for cover. They, however, kept hiding behind the cart, heavily entrenched, so the only progress that had been made was having taken down two more hostiles. Six raiders remained behind the cart, but their bulletproof cover and heavy weaponry let them keep the NER team at bay.

"Damn it!" I stomped the floor with my hoof. "They're dug in over there, behind the cart. I can't take them out from here."

"There is no other spot, bro." Nadyr shrugged. "Either the heavy weapons ponies do something or we'll be here for a long time. And when I say long I say balefire-winter long!"

Nadyr was right. The situation in Pipton had ended up in stalemate, unless something was done about it. The only good choice was to return to street level and to play a diversion, hoping to move the raiders out of their cover. However, the chances of achieving that without being gunned down mercilessly were very slim. Unless something totally unexpected happened, we would have to wait to see what happened.

"Hey!" I heard a voice say, down in the streets. "Look what I've found!"

No. Please, Celestia, let it be a weapon or a stash of caps, because if it wasn't that, there was only one thing left to be found around Pipton.

"No! Let me go!"

Fuck. They had Rose! I had to do something, quickly. I gazed nervously to the sides, looking for other vantage points, but there were none. From my position, the cart blocked any possibility of taking the raiders out, and now that they had Rose, I couldn't risk taking a shot. What should I do?

"Nadyr!" I roared. "They have Rose! Go free her, please!"

"Free her?" Nadyr screamed in anger. "You crazy or what? I ain't going in against six raiders to free your stepdaughter. I like her, but I would prefer staying alive, thank you very much!"

I wanted to rip Nadyr's heart out, but I had to admit he was right. Going in solo against the raiders was crazy, but I saw no other way out of it. I started to dismount the bipod. I would have to do things by myself.

"Oh, my, what a sweet filly!" One of the raiders chuckled. "Thank you, Pickaxe! You remembered I like them young!"

"Take your hooves off me!" I heard Rose cry, and my heart squirmed. I needed to do something quick, but the bipod had jammed and I wasn't going to get it out anytime soon.

"Relax, honey." The raider coughed. "Or it'll be more painful. Ooh! Look! She's still a blank flank!"

Fuck this. I left the rifle on the spot and darted downstairs. Those bastards wouldn't do anything to Rose as long as I was alive.

"Look! She's getting angry!" Another raider clapped his hooves, or at least it sounded like that. "I'm

shaking!”

“Well you should be.” What the fuck? That was Rose’s voice, but at the same time, it wasn’t. It sounded... distorted, clumsy. As if somepony else was talking by Rose’s mouth.

I reached the street and galloped towards the tumbled cart, readying my rifle for a gunfight. However, something wasn’t going right. The NER troopers saw me hurrying to the cart and followed me without a doubt.

“EEEYAAAAHHH!!!” The most hideous scream of pain came from behind the cart, and what looked like the bloody guts of a pony flew towards us. I dodged them and kept running until I reached the far end of the cart. Nothing could ready me for what I was about to see.

The asphalt floor was covered in a huge pool of blood, and one of the raiders was floating above it, his chest ripped open and dripping blood and gore. He should be dead, but he kept breathing air into two hideous, blackened lungs. I could see the heart of the Raider pumping frantically in despair. I wanted to throw up, but I was too puzzled to even do that.

On the other end was Rose. No, it wasn’t Rose. It was the evil Rose I had met in the Stable, the one mentally conditioned by the Lavender Fields Experiment. It looked like the sonic conditioning had left a mark on her brain, after all. She was looking at the raider with a crazed face, her eyes contracted into a tiny dot and her smile about to break out of her face. She was keeping him alive with her magic, just to make him suffer. The rest of the raiders were too awestruck to do anything to her.

The NER troopers advanced to take care of the remaining raiders, looking carefully at the murderous filly. However, Rose didn’t pay any attention to them, since she was enjoying her time with the mutilated pony. I couldn’t take it any longer. I breathed deep, trying to ignore the stench of blood in the area, and took a step forward.

“Rose, enough!” I roared.

The filly dropped the agonizing raider, who passed away with a sigh of relief. Then, she slowly turned around and looked at me with the same maniacal glare I had seen in her face when she shot me in the Stable.

“Come on, Farsight.” The filly smiled grimly. “You know my name.”

“Yes.” I gulped. “Lavender.”

“Good.” Lavender spoke softly, enjoying each word. “You’re a smart pony. I knew you’d realize.”

“Thank you.” I adopted the same soft tone. Speak softly, but carry a big stick, as somepony I can’t remember said. “Now tell me, have you taken over her?”

“Maybe. Does that bother you?”

“As long as you’re this reasonable, no. However, it’s not you who I saved. I saved Rose, and I’d like to have Rose by my side.”

“Heh. You really are lousy. I can taste your fear. Are you afraid of my power?”

“Yes. It would be unwise not to.”

“Correct. I like you, Farsight. I owe this body to you. Therefore, I’m willing to do you a little favor. This time, I’ll go to sleep and bring Rose back. But only this time.”

No, that wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted Lavender out, but I realized I wouldn’t be able to simply convince her to disappear. From what I was hearing, it appeared that Lavender was a living pony with her own mind and soul, who had implanted herself in Rose’s body. Perhaps, only perhaps, I could use Lavender for my own devices.

“I’m going to make an offer to you.”

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t want you, and I’m pretty sure Rose doesn’t want you either. But you want to live, and that is

reasonable. For now, let's say we just coexist in peace. When Rose is threatened, you come out and defend yourself, helping Rose in the process. When the danger is over, Rose gets the lead."

"Why should I accept that?" Lavender's muzzle curled in disgust.

"I'm offering you a peaceful solution. I like to be reasonable, that's my only defect. Maybe, and I say maybe, we can manage to 'port' you out into another body. In the meantime, let's just get along. There'll be more victims to quench your thirst for blood."

I was silently praying to all the Goddesses while I said that. If she didn't accept that, there was no chance of getting out alive without shooting Rose down. And I wasn't confident that I could actually do it.

"Still, why shouldn't I rip you apart?"

"You owe me your very existence. Let's keep that in mind. If it wasn't for me, you'd still be floating in Stable 173. On the other hand, I owe nothing to you. Try anything funny, and I'll kill you."

"You won't dare."

"Who says I won't?"

**BLAM!**

It had been a deliberately bad shot, since I didn't want to hurt Rose's body, but I wanted to make my point clear, and I had the feeling that I was starting to understand Lavender's scale of measure. The stronger and deadlier, the more respect I would get from her. The bullet whizzed past Rose/Lavender's head, rustling her mane with the flow of air the shot caused, and lodged itself on the dirt floor behind.

"Heh, heh, heh. You've got guts, and your soul's as black as mine. I'll consider your proposition in my sleep." Lavender nodded. "We'll speak again, Farsight... That's a Pinkie Promise."

Lavender closed her eyes and her expression changed. The horrid smile disappeared, and when the eyes opened again, it was Rose on the wheel once again.

"What happened?" she asked, puzzled.

"Uh... Your evil twin paid us a visit." Nadyr said, still a bit scared.

"Oh no... I'm sorry!" Tears started flowing from her eyes.

"It's OK now..." I hugged her. She hugged me back.

"Well, filly." Forger had returned to us. "It seems like your brain has a bit of a tangle. You should come with us back to the NER, where we could heal you."

"Sorry, sergeant. I can't go anywhere." Rose replied sternly. "I've already got plans in my mind." She looked at me with a sad smile.

Forger caught the implied message. He trotted up to me and took me aside, in search of a bit more of privacy. When we had gotten far enough from the rest of the crew, he spoke to me in quite a fatherly way.

"You know that filly adores you and has you as a role model, don't you?" His tone was stern once again.

"I am aware of that. And I can assure you I want her to become a righteous mare, even if I'm not the best example."

"She is your responsibility." Forger sighed. "I can't force you to do anything. You're not part of my crew, you're not even part of my country. Still, from a father to a father-figure, please take care of her. I have two children myself, a foal and a filly, back home at Buckarest, and I miss them every single day. If they grow up to be good ponies, then my life will have had purpose. I hope you see it that way as well."

"Rose will know what's right. That I promise. But she'll learn to fend off problems by herself. After all, she lives in the Wasteland, as all of us do. Yet, as long as I can, I'll watch over her."

Forger smiled and passed a hoof behind my neck in a sign of appreciation.

“You are a fine buck, Farsight. Even if you’re a mobster or a hoodlum, you’ve showed me honor. And that is more than enough for me.”

“Thanks, Sergeant.”

Forger turned away and trotted back to the crew. I followed him, thinking about what he had told me right now. Indeed, Rose was my responsibility ever since I saved her from those raiders. And my intentions were justified, even if I had to go through some bad times to achieve my goals. Would Rose see it that way when she looked back at her life?

“That’s right everypony!” Forger had returned to be the leader of a military team. “We return to base! Double time!”

“YES, SIR!” We all responded at once.

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The trip back to Nobuck was a bumpy ride. Evenstar stumbled upon a Cazadorable nest, which immediately sunk us flank-deep into serious trouble. Cazadorables were a particularly dangerous evolution of parasprites, which had developed a really strong and resistant carapace, as well as a dreaded venom that could kill you in a couple of hours. So, after having attracted around six or seven Cazadorables at us, we were in a really tight spot.

That is, until Nadyr started his show. He didn’t seem too worried about the six or seven lethal stingers that buzzed close to his hooves. Calmly, he cocked his gun and started trotting around, rolling over and pirouetting every now and then. The bugs flew around him, throwing furious stings at an elusive black shadow that was starting to drive them berserk.

Suddenly, Nadyr’s pistol emitted a faint blast and a flash, and one of the Cazadorables burst into purplish ichor. Again, another blast sent the second of the bugs down with a gaping hole on its thorax, and the half-zebra backflipped to escape three stings of deadly poison. The NER troopers readied their battle saddles, but I lifted a hoof to stop them. Somehow, I had the feeling that Nadyr had it all under control. I had seen Nadyr in action twice, suffered him once, so I knew what he was capable of.

“Hell yeah, how do you like it, bitches?” Nadyr laughed out loud, and shot twice. Two Cazadorables fell to the floor in a burst of ichor. Only three remained. Any other beast would have decided to save its life, but these bugs had the nasty habit of fighting to the death. Nadyr flipped, caught one of the venomous insects and stomped it against the floor. Then, another two blasts meant the end of this battle.

Nadyr was wiping Cazadorable ichor from his suit as we arrived at him. Rose jumped and hugged him.

“That was the most awesome thing I’ve seen in my life!” she screamed.

“Indeed, that was really impressive.” Forger seemed totally awestruck about the half-zebra’s display of agility. “How did you do that?”

“Well, seems like I inherited more from Pa than an exotic accent and some stripes in my coat.” Nadyr grinned. “Zebra agility, homies.”

“Amazing,” Forger muttered.

Nadyr winked an eye and started strutting away, back into Nobuck.

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“Are they gone?” Vice-President Heartstrings was quite impatient to hear the report.

“All gone, ma’am.” Forger said.

“How about our... guests?” Harpsong looked at us with a scowl on her face.

“Helpful, ma’am. The male unicorn is a worthy sniper, no doubt. About the zebra, he is unorthodox, but I wouldn’t like to find him on the other end of the battlefield. The filly is not somepony you’d like to play with. She has a problem of split personality. A deadly problem.”

“Good, good.” Harpsong nodded and smiled, disregarding what Forger said about Rose. “Sergeant Forger, dismissed.”

Forger saluted and left the room, leaving us three alone with Harpsong. Obviously, we had been forced to leave our weapons before entering the room. I knew the Vice-President of the NER wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but at least she knew the basics.

“Now,” she opened her forehooves as she sat strangely on a bench. She had managed to sit on her flank, leaving the back upright and her forelegs loose on the air “let's talk about Freedom Field. I want a full briefing.”

“Don't you have spies or something?” Rose asked.

“Not yet.” Harpsong gave a smug look to Rose. “You're the first.”

“Before we lose ourselves,” I started “Freedom Field is controlled by four gangs that are in a tight balance right now. The four, in order of military power, are the following: The Stringers, the Buckmares, the Coilites and the Followers of the Shy.”

“Details, please.”

“The Stringers are the main gang in Freedom Field, and our current employers. They dominate most of the town, and act as the keepers of peace. They endorse free trade and keep their violent acts hidden. Their leader is Dee Cleff, a sort of Godmother to the population of Freedom Field. They're dangerous. What scares me the most is that there's no way of actually measuring their power. They like to keep their cards hidden.”

“I see. Let me handle the power!” Harpsong boasted. “What about the rest?”

“The Buckmares base their economy in guns, drugs, booze and hookers. They're much more power hungry than the rest, and I know for certain that they're scheming to take Dee Cleff out of the throne. Then there's the Coilites, dealers of energy weapons. They have been isolationist for the last years, but they've agreed to ally with the Stringers to look for protection. Last but not least, the Followers. These ponies are supposed to be healers and act neutrally, but they got greedy and started a scam to send more addicts back to the Buckmares. Honestly, they're disgusting, but that's just an opinion.”

“I see that. So you say they're set in two big alliances?”

“Yes.”

“Great. That's all I needed to know. Dismissed.”

“But what are we supposed to do?” I asked.

“You're supposed to obey. You're NER assets now.” Harpsong gave me a cold glare. “Dismissed.”

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Night fell upon Nobuck while we were moving to our quarters. As we were saboteurs in the NER army, we received no proper gear or armor, apart from a sniper rifle like the one I had handled in Pipton. The buck at the armory told me that Sunlight Forger himself had requisitioned that rifle for me. I told to myself that I should pop by and thank him for it.

We were stationed in the old Nobuck Motel, one room for Rose and one shared between Nadyr and myself. Maybe this was the time to tighten the bonds between my striped companion and me. After all, if we were going to work together from now on, it would be best to get along.

“Hey, Nadyr,” I said “I know we didn't start with the right hoof... Hell, I just want to apologize for the pain I might have inflicted you, both physical and mental.”

“What's with the confession?” Nadyr looked at me with a puzzled face.

“It's not a confession. I think that, if we're partners now, I think we should set things straight from the very beginning. So, I'm sorry.”

“Kay. Apology accepted. Sorry for kicking your ass.”

“Thanks. I accept your apologies too.”

We both laughed softly at the comic situation. Two grizzled mercenaries kindly apologizing for having done their jobs.

“Hey, Nadyr. You asked me about my tale. Let me ask you something... What is your driving force?”

“My driving force?” Nadyr scowled. “Can’t you guess it? Look at me. Look at my coat. These stripes are my driving force! Do you even know how hard it is for a zebra, or even a half-zebra to move around the Wasteland? We’re seen as monsters, as mass murderers, as rapists, as necromancers... I’ve been bucked so hard and so many times my flanks have grown numb. But you know what? I’ve learned that money makes everything different. When somepony’s rich, the rest of the world don’t care about his origins, his race or his state of decomposition. I’ve seen rich ghouls banging picture perfect mares. Can you even imagine it?”

“It sounds disgusting.”

“Fuck! Of course it’s disgusting! That’s why I want to be rich. I want ponies to hate me for being filthy rich, not for being a zebra!”

Now that I had heard his reasons, I understood my companion. He had lived a harsh life, indeed, and he wanted something better. After all, we all did. I was starting to look at him with other eyes, I was starting to trust him.

“Farsight... what about you? Which is your driving force?” he asked.

“Me?” I replied. “I want everything that’s coming to me.”

“And what’s coming to you?”

“The world, Nadyr. And everything in it.” I replied, and lied down. I never slept better.

#

Note: Reputation Change

New Equestrian Republic: Affiliated. You’ve decided to join forces with these ponies. As long as you keep loyal, they’ll help you out.

**END OF ACT I**

***ACT II: MORNING***

## Chapter 6: Two Minutes To Midnight

*“Hello again, and welcome back to New Pegasus Radio! This is your host speaking, Mister New Pegasus, directly into your souls. Did you enjoy that last one? I’m pretty convinced you did. There is no bass like the one of Vinyl Scratch, or is it? I bet you couldn’t avoid following the rhythm. Come on, don’t be shy, it’s okay to tap your hooves! There will be more after the break.*

*Good news come from the Wasteland, indeed! The caravan trail that brings life supplies to Freedom Field can now return to its original trail close to the town of Nobuck since the raiders encamped there were wiped out by a group of brave volunteers. I want to see those hooves in the air for them! Seriously, everypony, we here at New Pegasus do not realize the harshness of the outside world, and the hard work the caravaneers do to bring us whatever we need. So cheers to you folks, the next track will be for you!*

*On to the issue of the last few days... The Ferratura murder, as it’s starting to be called in the streets. What a despicable situation indeed, and the New Pegasus Police Department doesn’t seem to be able to do any advance towards a solution. The latest word in the streets say that the officers wanted to question Full House himself, but the City Board entered before anything was done, and vetoed the order. From the looks of things, this humble reporter is starting to grow suspicious. I don’t like it when politicians start to stick their noses in police work.*

*Of course, the City Board has entirely denied this statement. The spokespony of the Council, Blurry Visage (what a name for a spokespony, don’t you think?) came forth last evening to say that the City of New Pegasus trusts its Police Force and that it will never interfere in police business. If you believe him, everything’s peaches. However, it doesn’t seem that the murderer will be easily found.*

*More news concerning the New Equestrian Republic arrived last night. Apparently, a heavy battle took place on the small village of Pipton yesterday. According to the NER Ambassador Merry, the soldiers of the Republic fought a band of raiders that had assaulted a guns shipment some days before. Now the town of Pipton is under NER control. Other sources, such as Wasteland scavengers or couriers confirmed the words of the Ambassador. My question here is the following, though. If the NER has only one base in the Neighvada territory, where was that shipment headed to? Again, I’m afraid that the truth will not be easily uncovered.*

*On this very matter, the City Board has stated that they have nothing to say about what happens beyond the New Pegasus walls. In other words, they’re giving the NER free hand to take control of all the territory, INCLUDING Freedom Field. I seriously doubt anypony has asked the inhabitants of our neighboring township about whether they’d like to be ruled by the NER or not. My friends, this humble reporter here thinks it can be the source of some serious trouble in the future.*

*And that’s all the news for now! I have something very special to give to you... It’s really fresh, a little gift from the great DJ Pon3, straight from Manehattan. Everypony, clean your ears and open your minds to the wonderful sound of Velvet Remedy! Remember, you’re listening to your favourite radio station, Radio New Pegasus, and this is your favourite host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly into your souls...”*

It was the first time I saw day break in the Wasteland.

I had to admit that it was beautiful. Even with the thick black cloud cover above, there was a thin strip of open sky in the horizon that would shift from black to blue with a hint of orange in the middle. If we could only get rid of the clouds...

I had woken up early because something worried me sick. Somepony rather than something. That somepony had two names, Rose and Lavender. Two souls cohabitating a single body. A lovely, righteous, honorable filly, the one I had saved and sworn to protect; or a murderous, psychopathic, deadly mare that had implanted herself in her mind. My fear was that Lavender could end up taking over Rose’s body, but I simply had no idea about what I could do to hinder it.

The fact of being surpassed by a mental challenge made me feel very uncomfortable. I took great pride of my

wits, and realizing there were walls I couldn't climb was painful. With these thoughts in my mind, I headed for breakfast. I chugged my oatmeal while wondering how to tackle the problem. I could go back into Stable 173, on my own of course, in order to search more information. However, I really doubted that Stable-Tec would have stored the documents explaining their experiment where the test subjects could reach them. No, that was out of the question.

I had read something in the Stable once that could be helpful. While hovering over old newspaper articles that had been stored in the Stable Database, I came across one that spoke about a breakthrough in mental medicine. Apparently, the Ministry of Peace had developed a spell that permitted the healer to enter the patient's mind to try to take care of the problems from the inside. The dangers of that technique were obvious, though. A wrong step inside and you could wreck the patient's mind irreversibly. That's why the technique had never been used widely.

There was a third choice. One I didn't like too much, but that I had to try, since it was the safest, so to speak. I wouldn't be able to destroy Lavender without destroying Rose in the process. Only Rose could defeat her inner demon. In the meantime, however, she could try to control it. Who knows, maybe Lavender could be a worthy ally, as long as we could keep her on a short leash. It was a very dangerous gamble, but great victories required great risks. A mass murderer like Lavender was like a megaspell. It could be a very powerful weapon if used correctly, or a maelstrom of destruction if used wrong.

"Morning, Farsight!" I heard Rose say.

I looked up and saw my protégé smiling at me from the other side of the table. She had a plate of oatmeal before her. I took a look at my plate, empty for a long while. How long had I been there, lost in my thoughts? She was wearing a rugged, dust-colored cloak over her old Wastelander outfit. The garment was the standard NER camouflage cloak, cut to a filly's size, and devoid of any Republican insignia. She did look better than before.

"Morning, Rose!" I greeted her with a smile. "How was your sleep?"

"It was great! It's the first time I sleep in an actual bed!"

"Really? Well, don't get too used to it... Who knows where we'll be tomorrow."

Rose nodded and shrugged, then she started eating. She was aware of our current situation, which made me realize how hard the little filly could be at times. Life in the Wasteland leaves a mark in everypony.

"Rose... I hate to talk about this, but..."

Rose lifted her head from the plate and looked at me in silence. Our eyes met and she immediately knew what I meant. Her muzzle curled in a face of sadness, giving the impression that she was about to cry, but then she nodded.

"You want to talk about Lavender, don't you?"

"Yes. I was able to speak to her yesterday."

"Were you? And what did she say?"

"Not much. It's not what she said, really. It's more what I was able to deduce from what she said. It seems like she's a completely independent being living inside you."

Rose winced, scared at the thought of it. I saw her muzzle shiver, she was about to start crying. I knew she was having a really bad time, but I had to do this, as much as it could hurt. It was funny, though, to see how much I cared about that filly. Right now, I didn't give a damn about anything else than me... and her.

"Rose..." I walked around the table and embraced her. "What happened when she came out? I need to know."

"I heard her voice calling. She said she could help me. And I was angry and scared, so I didn't think... And by the time I could notice, I had no control over my body. I saw everything from behind a red curtain, and heard nothing. I had to watch how I ripped that raider apart..."

Rose started sobbing. I kept her close and patted her back. I knew she loathed herself for what she did, but I

needed her to realize that it wasn't her fault.

"Rose, honey, it's not you. Keep that in mind. When that happens, it's not Desert Rose, it's Lavender. You should not blame yourself for what happened. Instead, I was thinking you might use it to your advantage."

"What do you mean?" Rose looked at me with big, wet eyes.

"I mean that you could try to summon Lavender when you need her."

"NO!" Rose shook her head violently. "How can you ask me that?"

I had expected that answer. Rose was so straight, so honor-driven, so willing to do the right thing that I assumed that she would consider using Lavender as a weapon to be a true abomination. However, I wanted her to understand that keeping her evil self under control was the best solution for now.

"Listen to me, Rose. If you don't control her, she'll control you. There's no way you're going to convince her of peacefully disappearing. We'll find a way of taking her out. In the meantime, I think it's best we cooperate."

"NO! I WON'T!" Rose yelled.

Rose's screams were drawing the attention of everypony around, so I grabbed her by the cloak and dragged her out of the mess hall and into the open. She was shaking around, trying to free herself from my grasp, and demanding me to let her go. Once we were far from the village, I dropped her on the dusty ground. She got up in a bounce and stared at me defiantly.

"You're going to summon her, now!" I said curtly.

"NO!" she screamed.

"YES!" I lifted a hoof, menacingly.

"NO, I AM NOT..."

Suddenly, Rose fell silent. Then, I witnessed the change of personality. Her eyes contracted into tiny dots, and her usually soft and warm expression turned into a chilling smile. Lavender had taken control once again. That's it. I had found what sparked the 'transformation'.

"I didn't know you liked me so much." Lavender smirked.

"Don't get me wrong, Lavender. I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Tell me, I'm listening." Her smile grew bigger. "Don't abuse my patience, though."

"We need to cooperate, Rose, you and I. As long as we try to find a way of getting you into another body, you'll stand by until Rose calls for help, and when the fray's over, you'll return to the back row. Understood?" I spoke firmly, not letting myself be overcome by the fear the murderous filly caused in me.

"You know I could just destroy Rose and take over her body, don't you?"

"Then I'll shoot you. And I'll kill you."

"You won't dare to shoot Rose."

"Look at me, Lavender." I pointed a hoof to my stern, cold-as-ice face. "Do you think I'm bluffing? Does this look like the face of a liar to you? Or don't you remember that I shot you the last time we met? Don't try to outsmart me. If you try to do anything funny, I'll kill you. I swear to Celestia I will. I don't care if I have to kill Rose in the process."

For the first time, I saw doubt in Lavender's eyes. I had impressed her. Then she started laughing in a blood-chilling way.

"Good! I like you more every day! You're almost as wretched as I am! Fine, we'll do it your way. But mark my words, if I get the slightest feeling that you're trying to trick me, I'll hang you from your guts. Understood?"

“It’s a price I can pay. Now get lost.”

Lavender nodded and closed her eyes. Once again, the filly’s face relaxed and her eyes returned to normal. Rose was back on the lead.

“What happened?” Rose asked.

“She’s accepted to cooperate.”

“So you did it after all.” Rose sighed and gave me a stare of disappointment. “I had hoped you’d be better than that. Seems I had hoped too much.”

She turned around and left me alone, wondering if, after all, I had done the right thing. Rose had the ability to make me feel wrong about what I believed was right. And still, I liked her.

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“Farsight, sir!” a trooper called me. “You’re expected at the Gummy Building!”

“Thanks, private!” I replied.

My first assignment as an NER agent. This could be interesting. If Harpsong had taken my suggestions into account, it would involve the gangs and Freedom Field. The news brought by the caravaneers (which had been properly bribed to “forget” about the NER encampment of Nobuck) talked about a great disturbance in the peace of Freedom Field. As if a change was coming. Everything wasn’t more than a simple rumor, however.

I walked into the Gummy Building. The trooper standing guard directed me to a small room in the top floor of the headquarters, right in one of the massive gator’s eyes. The room itself was small and smelt as if it hadn’t been opened in a very long time. Dust had piled on the floor, where a table had been hastily located.

I found myself looking at a high-ranked trooper of the New Equestrian Republic Army. His armor was full of stars and medals to bravery, sacrifice and combat prowess, and the many scars in his neck revealed that they hadn’t been obtained by means of politics. He had fought his way up the ladder. His coat had the same colour as the dusty floor of the Wasteland, and his mane, cut clean and short, was of a wooden brown. His face, crossed by a scar, displayed a constant smirk of disapproval. He didn’t like me, I didn’t have to be too smart to notice that.

“You must be Harpsong’s new acquisition.” He picked a big cigar from the saddlebag and lit it. If the place wasn’t unwelcoming enough, now I would have to deal with smoke.

“The name’s Farsight. And yes, I’m one of the new NER agents.”

“You’re nothing but a worthless faggot, that’s what you are! I never believed in that agent crap. Our Vice-President is a worthless idiot. Until today, we haven’t achieved a single victory thanks to her. If I was in the lead, I’d have conquered all of Neighvada and Coltorado by now!”

“Do you realize I could tell all of this to her, don’t you?”

“Of course I do, faggot. I’ve told her the same thing a million times, but she just won’t listen. So don’t play smart on me!”

“Yes, sir. Permission to ask, sir.” I realized this fellow was no pony to fool with.

“Ask away.”

“You haven’t told me your name, sir.”

“Stonetree. Captain Stonetree for you, faggot. I’m Vice-President Heartstrings’ second in command. And now that the formalities are over, let’s get to your mission.”

“Yes, sir.”

“The news that come from Freedom Field are worrisome. Apparently, what we expected to happen isn’t going to happen. When you spoke about two distinct alliances formed between the gangs, we assumed they

were gearing up for war between them. However, the last news of the caravaneers say they're planning to meet to discuss a possible alliance."

"An alliance between all factions, sir?"

"Exactly. All four factions want to form a single block to defend from us. Somehow, they have guessed our plans and they're going to get ready to resist. I need you to confirm that by being at the meeting. You say you worked for the gangs, didn't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Get into that meeting and see what's cooking. Then return here and brief."

"Will I have help if things get ugly?"

"No. You're on your own. Dismissed."

Well, wasn't that lovely. I was sent alone into a place where I wouldn't get a warm welcome. And if things went crashing down, there would be no rescue team for me. I had the feeling that Stonetree was using me as a weapon in his quarrel against Harpsong, but since there was no way of changing that, I'd better be practical and think of ways in and out of a not so friendly Freedom Field.

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The news were right. When I arrived at Freedom Field, I had the feeling that hell had broken loose in town. Ponies worked in hectic activity reinforcing the walls, installing defences, clearing the roads outside the walls from debris... The city was getting ready for a siege, and that didn't mean good news to me. Inside, the situation was pretty much the same. Civilian ponies prepared barricades, firing positions and supply trenches while the gang soldiers patrolled and gave orders.

The gang soldiers didn't pay much attention to me, as I was another armed Wastelander that crossed the gates, looking either for protection or for work. However, I knew that I wouldn't go unnoticed once I got close to any of the gang headquarters. I hadn't been away that long for the leaders to forget me. With that in mind, I acted as if I hadn't switched sides. I carelessly trotted into the Music School, where I left my weapons at the entrance counter. Then, I headed into the Music Hall without even knocking.

"Who the... Farsight?" Metronome was caught off guard by my entrance. I enjoyed watching true surprise in her face. Just an instant later, she returned to her usual smug behaviour towards me.

"Hi, Metronome." I waved. "Mission accomplished."

"Mission accomplished? Are you out of your mind? Nobuck was an NER encampment, you can't have cleared it all by yourself!"

So they already knew. It wasn't that much of a surprise, after all. Now I had to find a convincing lie to have Metronome bite.

"All right, all right, we failed." I smiled and shrugged. "We had to run for our lives, we spent a couple of days trying to shake the NER off our tails. They backed away when we got close to New Pegasus. It seems they want to keep unnoticed."

"What about Nadyr and the filly?"

"Nadyr got tagged. Nothing too big, but he had to stay behind to rest while Rose healed him. He told me he'll lay low for a while, so he won't be coming back soon. I, on the other hand, decided to come with the news, but it seems you already know."

"Yes, a caravaneer told us the NER tried to bribe him not to reveal their position. Too bad we pay him more."

Well, so much for the secrecy of the NER. Never trust a greedy caravaneer. However, it was funny to see how the very same caravaneer sold secrets to both sides. He was a true winner.

"I see. Well, I'm back. Is there anything important going on? Because the city seems very, very stirred."

"Yes, we have a meeting taking place later. All the gang leaders, and I happen to need a bodyguard in case

things get ugly.”

Nooooo. It was too easy. It couldn't be like that.

“What about LaRoche?” I couldn't accept that easily, she might suspect something.

“He's guarding Ampera, you foal. I think you can go. After all, you're as bad as any other. As long as you keep your mouth shut, everything will be fine.”

“No problem, Metronome. I won't say a word. I'll just listen.”

And by the holy Celestia that I would listen. I wouldn't miss a single word.

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The meeting would take place in the Old Pegasus Fort because it could be considered “neutral territory”, since the Followers didn't have any actual military power. It seems that Dee had tried to host the meeting, and the same had been Saddle Buckmare's intention. Of course, nopony was intending to give in, until Ampera forced the conditions of the meeting: Noon, in the Old Pegasus Fort, two bodyguards per gang boss. That'd make a three-on-three game with four sides. More correctly, a three on three on three on one, since the Followers hadn't wanted to hire any bodyguards.

The Fort was stirred. Ponies wearing the Followers' emblem rushed from one place to another, moving the precious medical supplies to a safe place, or ensuring that the wounded weren't close to any possible firing lines, because, after all, nopony knew how this would turn out. As I had supposed, the big table in the center of the patio would serve as our conference hall.

Goldie came bouncing at me, her face showing an ironic smirk. Her copper and gold mane wiggled poofily in front of her eyes.

“Well, if it isn't Farsight, back from the dead.” Goldie gave me a questioning glare. “I'm really surprised to see you here. Tell me, how did you make it out alive?”

“Glad to see you too, Goldie.” I winked. “Now honestly, do you really want to know? Don't you think you'll live better in ignorance?”

“No, I really want to know. I want to martyrize Saddle a little bit tonight, by telling him how useless his goons are.”

“His goons are not all that useless, Goldie. In fact, they did a pretty nice job. It's just that I'm... irresistible.”

“You talked your way out?” Goldie clenched her teeth. She couldn't stand my mockery.

“Not really. I used... other assets of my body.” Wink wink, nudge nudge.

“You... oh, Celestia. Note to self. Hire straight goons for questioning.” Goldie turned around and left, mumbling something I couldn't understand.

Not bad, not bad. They didn't suspect anything. Besides, I was enjoying myself at the moment. After all, there was no problem in having a little fun before work. It was the first blow of the many I would deliver to Goldie.

I headed to the table, where Dee and Metronome were waiting. On the direct opposite side, Saddle Buckmare was standing defiant in an old, battered hazel colored suit. No, that wasn't the best choice when your fur is silvery gray. His bodyguards were surprisingly different to each other. The first one was a small stallion, old and weary, clad in a light barding with the Buckmare emblem on it. One of his eyes was covered with a patch and he was smoking an almost worn out cigarette. Even if frail, he gave an impression of true seniority, making him look much more dangerous than it could appear at first sight. The second one was an old acquaintance of mine, a towering griffin that could either rip you apart or smother you in sweet, sweet love. Stuka Talonblade. Then, on the left side, the white-maned leader of the Coilites, Ampera von Ohm, looked at both sides with evident boredom. The Coilites had been driven into this alliance with promises of great benefits, but they weren't into all the fighting. They wanted peace and profit, that's all. Ampera was surrounded by two bodyguards, one of them being LaRoche, the tall, dark and ugly stallion that I had met in

the Tesla Bar. Completing the square, Goldie stood in front of Ampera, looking at everypony with a rather angry face, which became angrier when her eyes met mine.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air, as all the leaders looked at each other, waiting for some of them to start talking. One could say this was one big game of cards, where each player was examining his opponents' emotions and stance, looking for traces of weakness or nerves. Finally, after some minutes of tense gazes, Dee Cleff cleared her throat, making the first move. Game on.

"Good morning, everypony." Dee's tone was solemn, stern, fitting to the importance of the meeting. "I assume you all know why we're here."

"Yes, we do." Saddle replied curtly. "But that's not going to stop you from exposing the situation, is it?"

"Mister Buckmare," Ampera interrupted "if you don't mind, I'd like to hear the full briefing, please. I want to know what we're facing."

"That's right, Saddle." Goldie nodded sternly. "There's no problem in hearing it once again."

"Hmph. I've got better things to do." Saddle groaned.

"Saddle, please." Dee gave Saddle the look a mother would give to a conflictive foal. "I'd be very grateful if you respected all the opinions in this table."

"Don't mind him." Goldie waved a hoof. "Carry on, Miss Cleff."

"Thanks." Dee nodded thankfully at Goldie. Such manners for being enemies. "As you are aware of, the situation of Freedom Field has become... complicated in the last few months, mostly due to an acronym of three letters. NER. The New Equestrian Republic has set its eyes upon Neighvada, and we're in the way."

"In the way?" Ampera asked. "Do they plan to destroy New Pegasus?"

"I don't think so..." Metronome spoke. "New Pegasus moves a lot of money, most of it in gambling and luxury goods. I think the NER wants to control the city to earn a slice of the cake as taxes. Freedom Field, however..."

"We're nothing else than a bunch of drug pushers, are we not?" Saddle asked ironically.

"So to speak." Goldie shrugged.

"Indeed, the New Equestrian Republic's stance towards us isn't all that clear." Dee smiled kindly at both sides. "The NER Ambassador in New Pegasus, Merry Fields, hasn't said anything clear about the status of Freedom Field. When referring to New Pegasus, she's clearly stated that it will continue being independent."

"That's pretty much saying that they want to assimilate us." Ampera shook her head. "However, let me ask you one thing. Is that really a bad thing?"

"A bad thing?" Saddle roared. "Do you think the NER will let us carry on like this?"

"Ampera, please, be reasonable." Goldie smiled at Ampera, trying to soften Saddle's position. "Saddle is right. As far as we know, the NER is the common do-gooder. They won't just forgive and forget when they see what we do here for a living. They'll shut it down, or even worse, they'll want their share of the earnings."

"But think about it for a second." Ampera scowled. "If we fight them, there is the non-neglectable choice of losing. If that ever comes to happen, our businesses will be over and we won't be here to see how the city develops under NER control. If, on the other hand, we try to negotiate, we might get to keep some of our earnings to ourselves. We might be able to convince them. I say we accept the NER rule under some statute of autonomy, that allows us to keep business as usual."

"Ampera, I think that the electromagnetic fields in your place have melted your brain. Are you seriously listening to what you're saying?"

"Yes, I am. I'm proposing a non-violent solution that could benefit us."

"They won't bite." Goldie shrugged and shook her head. "Haven't you heard their Ambassador on the radio?"

They're going for the full cake. We need to fight for ourselves."

Ampera tried to mutter something, but Dee rose a hoof ordering her to keep silent. It was her time to talk.

"Ampera, please, let me handle this. There is another problem," Dee continued, "the City Board has left us on our own."

"Bastards." Saddle grunted.

"Politicians." Dee nodded. "So, we're facing a serious threat and we're on our own. To add something more to the mix, we just learned from a caravaneer that the NER has secretly established a forward base in the town of Nobuck, which is far closer to New Pegasus than Divide Pass."

"That's less than three days." Goldie's estimate was good.

"Exactly. That's why I've decided to call this meeting. We need to address the problem in an appropriate way. Our main objective is to retain our privileges, whoever rules over town. Therefore, I support Ampera's proposal. I say we send an envoy to negotiate with the NER. We should try to obtain a statute of autonomy for Freedom Field, like the one they've granted to New Pegasus."

"You what?" Saddle roared. "That's absurd, Dee. Why would they give us autonomy?"

"Saddle, what does the NER want?"

"Didn't they say it already? They want to conquer Neighvada."

"What for?" Dee asked. I was starting to follow her reasoning, and it was correct. "Neighvada is a dry patch of land, and Freedom Field is even drier. They won't fight for some land in which they can't farm or raise animals."

"What do you mean?"

"Saddle, the NER, even with all the politics and its fancy talking, is nothing more and nothing less than a bunch of ponies under a same banner. They're not all that different to us, after all. They have needs like you or I do. They need food, water, clothes, guns, ammo, medicine and even booze, hookers and drugs. But over all, they want money. What we could offer is a tax in exchange for protection and autonomy."

"Taxes? Like the one you've imposed for water?" Saddle stomped the floor. "I'm not paying any more taxes! I'll go out and fight the Republic if necessary!"

"Now, Saddle, shut up!" Goldie raised her voice. "Dee, forgive him. He's a bit... impulsive, as you and I well know. Now, even if I understand your reasoning, I don't think they'll accept that. As I said earlier, I seriously doubt they will simply accept to have gun runners and drug dealers trading around in their territory just for a tax. Didn't you hear about the attack on Pipton?"

"Pipton?"

"Yes, a bunch of gun runners that had occupied the abandoned village were wiped out with brutal force, just because they were doing business in NER territory. What makes us different from them?"

Wow, masterful move, Goldie. I had to give her that. It was a blatant lie. The radio, indeed, had told something about our job in Pipton, but the rest was an invention, carefully crafted to alter Dee's opinion. Even if I knew the truth, I couldn't say anything or they would suspect me.

"Are you sure that's the truth?"

"As sure as I can be. One of them managed to escape, wounded. He came to the Fort looking for help, but there was little we could do to save him. He had lost a great amount of blood. However, he told me about Pipton. It matched what the radio had said, so I believed him."

"And he's dead now, right?"

"Yes. Dead and buried."

Dee groaned and looked to the open sky, as if she was expecting the answer to fall from the clouds. I had to

admit that Goldie's gambit had been very smart. A good lie always has bits and pieces of truth in it, just to make it easier to swallow. This one, even if blatant, was covered in actual facts, so Dee had no way of proving it wrong. With this card on the table, Dee and Ampera's position had become weak. Would they agree to start a war?

"What do you suggest we do, Goldie?" Dee asked. "Are we supposed to fight?"

"Not at all, Dee. That would be fairly unwise. I suggest we use non-violent opposition."

"Explain yourself."

"It's easy. We refuse to join the NER, but we resist peacefully."

"And that's going to stop them? Goldie, that is pure junk."

"Dee, think about it for a second. If the NER defeats us, the control of the population will be their job. Now, if we get all fired up and we start a war, they can assume the role of a liberator or a pacifier. On the other hand, if we resist peacefully and they attack, they'll be clearly assuming the role of an invader. Now, we all know how the population reacts to liberators or pacifiers, and how it reacts to invaders."

"I get it. They won't invade us because they don't want a rebellious population. Good thinking, Goldie. What do you say? Do you like Goldie's solution?"

Saddle nodded and Ampera did pretty much the same.

"Okay, then it's settled. We'll go by the way of the peaceful resistance. However, we'll have our guns ready, just in case we need them. On to other matters, there is another condition I'm adding to our agreement."

Saddle was about to say something, but Dee's expression changed from motherly care to stern determination. She knew who had the lead in this matter, and who would have to give in and shut up. I understood immediately. This was no negotiation, this was an imposition. Have it my way or face my consequences.

"Now, if we want this alliance to succeed, there are some rules of engagement you need to understand. We can't have drug addicts going berserk or littering the streets as usual. That would bring the NER to our gates, claiming they're here to ensure the population's safety. Therefore, I want you to increase the prices of the harder drugs, and make sure to keep a stockpile in case of emergencies. If I hear you're not following with my command then I'll revoke your monopoly on drugs, or cut down on your water supply. Understood?"

That was part of my plan all along, but Dee had mutated it to use it to her advantage. She was very, very smart. Now she was forcing the conditions she wanted, and Saddle and Goldie looked like they had taken a beating. Masterful move, I would have never done it better. Too bad Dee was in my way, I really appreciated her ability.

"That's preposterous!" Goldie roared."

Dee turned to face Goldie with a commanding glare and the mare squirmed courtly.

"These are my conditions. Take them, and we'll be happily allied. Reject them, and you'll be on your own. Against the NER and against me."

Silence again. Ampera had separated from the table and was discussing something with LaRoche. I knew she would join Dee's gamble, since I had crafted that alliance myself. Goldie and Saddle looked at each other, obviously disgusted. Their little scheme would be soon over. I was rejoicing inside, even if it wasn't my doing.

"Urgh. OK." Saddle nodded grumbling. Goldie nodded in silence.

Metronome passed a piece of paper where the different leaders left a signature. The alliance was signed, and the Buckmare-Follower scam was over. And what was more important to me, I had my information. Now I had to find a way of returning to Nobuck.

"Farsight," Dee said looking at me, "you've met the NER before, haven't you? I'd like you to be our envoy. Deliver our conditions and bring back their reply."

I nodded sternly, even if I was smiling inside. Dee had guaranteed my escape plan. The meeting had been dismissed and the partakers were starting to leave. Dee waved and left humming a tune I couldn't recognize. I trotted past the table towards Saddle and his bodyguards. The old stallion nodded in welcome, and Stuka set her clawed talon gently, almost seductively, on my back. She was glad to see me again. I, on the other hand, couldn't hide a certain something ticking in my heart. It wasn't love, but it was a feeling all along.

"Fuck you." Saddle's greeting was what I expected it to be. "You're a lucky bastard. I don't want to know how you make it out alive, but someday you'll get your flank nailed." That was a veiled menace. He hadn't forgotten about me.

"I'm a lucky buck, that's all." I smiled smugly. I knew I had to be careful when handling him, but I couldn't hide how much I enjoyed seeing him angry because of me.

"Don't mess with me, Farsight. Or I'll turn your life into living hell."

"I'm not messing with you, Mister Buckmare. However, I think my luck is running out. If I could choose, I'd leave town right now."

"But you can't choose. That's why you're here. I'm heading back to the Diamonds. You two," he said at his bodyguards, "I want to see you in the casino in half an hour. Understood?"

"Understood, Mister Buckmare." They nodded.

Buckmare turned around and left hastily. I had sensed his anger, his hate towards me. Minute after minute, it became clearer that I had to leave as soon as possible, or I'd probably find death in a dark alley. And just like Captain Stonetree had kindly let me know, I was on my own on this one. No rescue, no hope.

Stuka and the grizzled soldier came closer, smiling with a relaxed attitude. Apparently, Saddle's bad mood was something usual, or he was all bark and no bite. However, I doubt they were really aware of the mess I was sunken in. The old stallion moved forward and greeted me.

"Aw shucks. Don't 'cha pay attenshun to ol' grumpy Saddle. He ain't nuffin' but a colt on a fancy suit. Ah'm Snake Eater, by the way, here to help ya!"

Snake Eater offered his hoof. I waved it and found a sturdy, safe hoof. Even if a bit rednecky, Snake Eater was a respectful, good soldier, and I appreciated that.

"I'm Farsight, bodyguard and, what it now seems, expendable piece to Dee Cleff's organization. Pleased to meet you."

"Pleasure's mine. Ah think y'already know my feathered friend, Stuka Talonblade, right?"

I looked at Stuka, unsure about how much of our relationship would be safe to reveal, but was met with a firm hug.

"Ah thought so." Snake Eater laughed softly. "Ah know how she likes to squeeze 'em."

Stuka grinned as much as a bird can grin, while predator talons gripped into my coat firmly. Her wings bloomed and she lifted me off the ground.

"Farsight." Stuka pecked my muzzle, and I responded in turn exchanging tongues at high altitude while appreciating the joy of meeting someone that liked being with me again. However my feelings for her were for the weak pony I was back then. I'd desperately clung to any love, and Stuka had supplied. She had my thanks, and some part of me still wanted to keep that.

Wordlessly we clung in the air until she put me back on the ground. Breathless and reaffirming my love for being earthbound once more I chanced to test my voice. "Go-good to see you again."

"I counted the days you were gone.." She whispered in my ears, but Snake Eater coughed loudly to interrupt her.

"Not to be a bother, but boss is waiting for us."

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I had ended up following Snake and Stuka into the Four Little Diamonds instead of leaving town as fast as possible. Something in my mind was beeping, trying to alert me of the dangers I was walking into by setting a hoof in the property of a pony that had sworn to turn my life into hell, but I couldn't just leave Stuka. She had the ability to silence my mind and make me act according to more primary reasons. This time, we were having lunch in one of the restaurant tables of the dirty casino.

"I've missed you, dear." Stuka smiled lovably while looking into my eyes.

"Me too, Stuka, honey." I smiled back. "So, how have things been going these days?"

"Oh, nothing too interesting, love. The world is going crazy, and old Saddle is getting grumpier every day. He wanted war, he had prepared himself for war, and now he is forced to keep peace and lose his main income. I think the near future will be tough."

I had been brewing a cunning idea that involved Stuka, as she was a bodyguard and a trusted one to Saddle Buckmare. There was one way of profiting from that, and that implied having her as my 'mole' inside the Buckmare gang. I decided to make my move and propose that plan to her.

"Are you happy?"

"What do you mean, honey?"

"I asked you if you are happy. If you like your job or your boss."

"Well, I can't complain..." Stuka doubted. "I have a job with a good pay, and I have a relative safety, which is much more than what many can ask for... But Saddle is a nasty bastard."

"Then why don't you come with me?"

"Come with you? And leave Saddle? Do you think he'd let me go?"

"I never said that, honey. I said that you and I can work together. I have my plans, plans that go beyond these gangs, beyond Saddle and his narrow mind. But I need you to help me. With your collaboration, you and I will reach great things..." I narrowed my eyes and purred to her ear while caressing her gently. "... together."

Stuka shivered in delight while hooting softly. I had her right where I wanted, both mentally and physically. I enjoyed the moment while I saw her smile at me, totally submitted to my will.

"Together..." she cooed. "Yes, together. What do you have in mind, honey?"

"Stuka, dear, I need you to keep doing what you were doing until now, but I also want you to be my eyes and ears. I want you to tell me what Saddle does, what he plans and what he wants or desires. Don't press him, just pay attention. And if things get risky, forget about it. I want you to be safe, my dear."

"Don't worry, honey. I know how to take care of myself."

"I know that." I smiled and I kissed her softly.

"Stuka! What the hell does this mean?" A voice roared behind us.

I turned around to see Saddle Buckmare standing right behind us with a face of utter disgust. It was understandable, since he couldn't stand me and now I was making out with one of his bodyguards. I realized that he could have eavesdropped our conversation, so I had to do something to know if Stuka was in danger.

"This means we're... together. We met some time ago, before I even knew she worked for you, Mister Buckmare. But, with all due respect, were you spying on us? Because we were talking about private things. Very private." Wink wink, nudge nudge, just in case he hadn't noticed.

"Oh, hell, no!" Buckmare winced in disgust. "I don't give a living fuck about whatever you do in bed. And I don't care if you're together, as long as Stuka keeps working for me. However, if you try anything funny, you'll regret it."

"There's no need for loud words, Mister Buckmare. I know what you're capable of. I won't mess around, I promise."

“Good. Now, weren’t you supposed to leave for Nobuck or something?”

“All right, all right, I’m leaving. Just give me some time to say goodbye to Stuka... in private, if you don’t mind.”

Saddle grunted something and turned around, leaving us alone once again. Stuka got close to me and whispered in my ear.

“Why did you tell him about us?”

“If he knows we’re together, he won’t suspect anything if he knows that we meet every now and then. At least, it’ll take him some time to start suspecting.”

“I see... Good move, darling.”

“Thanks, honey. Now, I have to go, or Saddle will get mad. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

I kissed her and left hastily. The sooner I left the city, the safer I’d be.

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Once I had set enough distance between Freedom Field and myself, I slowed down to a gentle trot. There was no reason to burn myself out fleeing from an inexistent enemy. Besides, as long as I kept close to the New Pegasus walls, the wild beasts wouldn’t be a menace. After years of failed attacks, they had learned to avoid the city.

It took me a couple of days to get back to Nobuck. I got to see the Gummy Building a little bit after sunset, so I decided to set up camp and return to base at dawn. After a good night’s sleep, the sound of steps woke me up. Back on my hooves, I opened the eyes to see myself surrounded by NER troopers. Some of them aimed at me with their guns, some of them seemed less worried about my presence there. I looked for a known face in the lot, maybe Sunlight Forger or Evenstar. However, none of them were there.

“State your business in NER territory, stranger!” one of the troopers ordered.

“I’m here... I’m here to report back to Vice-President Heartstrings.” I yawned.

“Ha!” the trooper laughed. “What do you know the Vice-President from?”

“I’m Farsight, agent of the NER, under direct command of the Vice-President!” I roared. “Just take me to her!”

“Shut the fuck up, Wastelander.” The trooper gave me an angry look. “Or I’ll beat the crap out of you and leave your body to the Cazadorables!”

“You will not do that, Pike.” A voice called from behind the lot.

“What? Who?” The trooper called Pike looked around.

Another trooper came from the far side of the road, his battle saddle ready to fire if necessary. I could recognize his orange coat and his face from before. Private Carrots, if I wasn’t mistaken.

“Carrots!” Pike scowled. “You have no authority!”

“I don’t. But this Wastelander is an undercover NER agent, just as he said. Beat him up and you’ll be directing the caravan traffic in the Divide in no time.” Carrots spoke calmly, but there was an obvious menace in his tone.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Carrots? This scum here is nothing but a damn raider who’s come here to find death!”

“Pike, I’m amazed they even let you in the NER army in the first place. If we have to rely on the likes of you to defend our country, we’re going to have a hard time.”

Pike clenched his teeth after hearing Carrots’ words. He was about to pull his gun out when a single shot

from Carrots' battle saddle landed some centimeters away from his hoof.

"Are you out of your fucking mind, Carrots?" Pike yelled. The rest of the troopers had slowly moved from Pike's side to Carrots' side, leaving my attacker alone and exposed.

"Private Pike," Carrots' voice echoed on the morning wind, "stand down immediately and return to your post. I'll take care of our guest from this point on."

Pike mumbled something I could not make out but saluted and moved on. The rest of the troopers hastily returned to their duties, leaving Carrots alone with me. He smiled and threw an apple from his saddlebags to me. I lifted it and dragged it to my mouth, and ate it in two bites. The taste of the apple and the feel of it down my throat made me feel much better. Nothing better than a fresh apple for breakfast.

"Great to see you made it in one piece." Carrots grinned. He was a well-mannered pony, as it seemed. "And what is more important, which is the situation in Freedom Field?"

I was supposed to report directly to Harpsong, but I guess it would mean no harm to tell him. After all, I supposed that he could ask any caravaner for the same information.

"Things are bad out there, Carrots. The four gangs have decided to form an alliance against the NER, and are gearing up for war. Freedom Field is getting ready for a very long siege."

Carrots had been listening to me in silence, then gave me a stern look. He seemed to be meditating the answers he could give me.

"I'll take you to Vice-President Heartstrings, she'll be waiting for the report you have to give her. But to be honest, I think we all saw it coming. You did a great work, if that is worth anything to you."

"Thanks. But somehow I have the feeling that I will have to infiltrate in Freedom Field again." I smiled faintly and followed Carrots up the hill and towards the Nobuck motel. That was surprising, I thought that we were heading for the Gummy building. Instead, Carrots stopped in front of a door and knocked three times.

"Vice-President! Sorry to bother you, but I have somepony here with very important matters to discuss. It's urgent, ma'am."

Somepony grumbled something I could not understand behind the closed door and I heard hoofsteps closing in to us, then the door opened. Harpsong was standing in front of us, her mane rustled and disorderly, dressed in nothing but a frilly white nightgown. She was drinking coffee in a small mug that read "World's number 1 Vice-President". I had to refrain from rubbing my eyes. I hadn't noticed until that very moment how attractive Harpsong could be.

"What is it, private?" Harpsong mumbled. "Can't you see I'm still half asleep?"

"It's a top-class emergency, ma'am."

"Okay, okay. Don't go all protocolary on me... Farsight?" she noticed me for the first time and almost dropped her coffee. "What is going on?"

"I'm here to report about the situation in Freedom Field. I've come directly to you because I don't trust Captain Stonetree." I knew there was a little conflict inside the NER, and I had to pick my side. This one was a no-brainer, though.

"Great work, Farsight, I didn't think you'd make it out alive. After what Stonetree ordered you to do, I never thought you'd be back to report. You're proving to be a very good agent, and I like it... Hell, I'm starting to like *you*. Give me a minute to freshen up and I'll be with you."

The door slammed shut again. Carrots gave me an amused look.

"Did I hear what I think I heard?" he whistled. "VP Heartstrings likes you? Damn you lucky bastard. She's the best flank you'll see in all Neighvada, and all the bucks in camp would like to take her for a ride. Of course, we're just daydreaming... You're making me feel jealous!"

I smiled at Carrots' reaction. "I've got other worries right now, Carrots. Besides, I don't think she meant she liked me that way."

“Oh, I know her enough to notice that she...”

Carrots got interrupted by the door opening again. Harpsong came out of the room dressed in a fancy green suit with the NER crest on her flap. She had carefully combed her green and white mane and... did I notice a faint scent of perfume on her? Maybe Carrots was right after all.

“Follow me, Farsight.” She started walking towards the Gummy building. I followed her into the old Ministry of Morale Hub, now turned into a field headquarters for the New Equestrian Republic.

The activity inside the building was as frantic as the last time. Several terminals flashed streams of data in quick succession, radio waves filled the air with reports of the different patrols scattered around the Wasteland, and maps of the Neighvada Territory covered the walls and tables of the Republican center of operations.

“Tell me, Farsight.” Harpsong looked at me with a worried expression. “What is the current situation in Freedom Field?”

“Worrisome. Pretty worrisome.” I started walking up and down the room to freshen my muscles. After all, I had been woken up a bit harshly. “I could make it to the meeting between the gangs. All that we had planned has fallen to pieces, since the four gangs have decided to team up against the Republic.”

“Team up against us?” Harpsong looked surprised. “How can they take us as a threat?”

“Seems like the caravaneer you paid to keep silent was paid better in Freedom Field. The gangs know you’re stationed in Nobuck.”

“Fucking caravaneers!” Harpsong roared. “That’s it. No more bribing. The next time we have to deal with them, we’ll speak with a gun pointed towards them.”

Harpsong grumbled something and walked up and down the room as well. I didn’t think that threatening the caravaneers with a gun would keep them silent. After all, the gangsters could threaten them with bigger guns. Or torture. After all, they were the bad guys and the NER were the good guys. At least, that’s what they were meant to be.

“Erm, Harpsong... I don’t think that’ll be useful. They’ll end up talking.”

“Whatever, whatever. Seems like our plan has gone down the drain. What’s the current military power of the gangs?”

So, the Republic had decided to make things the hard way. After all, Stonetree would get his action.

“It’s a force to be reckoned. From what I could see in there, they’re getting ready for a siege. Trenches, supply lines, general feeling of alert... they want to resist. However...”

“They’re not dumb, I’ll give them that. Could you tell me something about their numbers?”

“Not much, really. What I can tell you, though, is that they’re heavily armed. One of the gangs controls the firearms market, so they have a really big stash of guns and ammunition. Even the smallest filly could punch a hole through you if things get ugly. Then, another gang has a massive amount of energy weapons ready, so all your armor will be useless if they get them ready to shoot. Still...” Harpsong was interrupting me every time before I could say the key words.

“Crap. A direct assault is impossible, then. How about long sieges? What’s their supply status?”

“You won’t break them that way either. The City of New Pegasus will force you to keep the supply lines open, since the caravans have to traverse Freedom Field in order to get into New Pegasus. Therefore, you can’t avoid them getting supplies. The only thing is...”

“How about their medical capabilities? Will they be able to sustain a long war?”

“Definitely. They’ve got a lot of medical supplies there, and a great amount of qualified healers as well. The Followers of the Shy are worthy combat medics, I’m sure about that. Just...”

“Damn! DAMN!” Harpsong let out a roar of despair. “How the fuck am I supposed to take these bastards

out?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you from the first place! They aren’t going to wage war in the first place.” I warned. “The gangs decided to resist peacefully to the Republic.”

“Resist peacefully?”

“That’s it. They won’t join the NER, but they won’t fight you either. If you want the city, you’ll have to go in and take it from them.”

“That’s lousy.”

“Not really. In fact, it’s a good plan.”

“How can you say it’s a good plan? We have an army?”

“I know you have an army. However, I also know that you don’t want to have to use the army to keep the population under control, because that would hinder your possible advances.”

“That is basic. We can’t have the whole army worried about suppressing revolts.”

“Well, there’s my point. If you take the city from the gangs while they’re just resisting peacefully, the people will see you as an invader, and will revolt as soon as they have a chance.”

“Oh, yes? And what do you suggest to do?”

“I don’t know, honestly. As long as they’re united in their idea of resisting, there’s not much we can do about it. If their unity started to crumble, however...”

“Of course!” Harpsong’s eyes glittered. “Farsight, I could kiss you right now!”

“Can you? Oh, well, as you wish, my dear.” I smiled gently. I liked where this was going.

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Sadly for me, there was no kissing or hugging. After saying that, Harpsong exploded into a maelstrom of activity, roaring orders via a radio transmitter, calling troopers of all ranks to the meeting room and discussing plans of all kinds. I was feeling rather overwhelmed by her display of eagerness, so I went out for a walk.

The morning breeze was still cold, but I enjoyed it, as it cleared my still numb mind. I wondered what Rose and Nadyr would be doing at the moment. If their missions were as dangerous as mine, they would be tied up in real trouble, and that worried me... a little, in what involved Rose. I still didn’t trust Nadyr all that much, but I knew he was capable of handling himself in combat. Rose, however, hadn’t face a really tough situation before. Maybe if she trusted in Lavender she would make it out alive.

I was stuck in my thoughts when I walked into the training field. The sound of gunshots roared in the morning air. Rapid bursts of fire rippled across the firing range, and I was surprised to see a little filly in a camo cloak firing a small black pistol. Rose’s face was like stone, unwavering after every blast, cold and concentrated. The NER drill instructor watched in silence and nodded. She was starting to show prowess with the pistol, at least at short distance.

I greeted the instructor with a silent nod and watched Rose handle herself with the pistol I had given her when we met. Unlike Nadyr, who showed true enjoyment when handling a gun and delivering blazing death, Rose took shooting as something done out of pure necessity, and tried to show no emotion when doing it. In the deep of my heart, I was pretty sure she was unhappy in the inside.

**BANG! BANG! Click!**

“That will be enough for today, Rose.” The drill instructor took a step forward and patted Rose on the back. “You’re doing great progress. Just remember to keep the gun steady when you pull the trigger.”

“Want a tip?” I interrupted gently. “Try holding your breath before shooting if you want more precision. I found it helps.”

“Indeed.” The instructor nodded.

“Farsight!” Rose jumped when she turned her head to see me. “You’re back!”

I hugged the little filly. I was very glad of seeing her again in good shape. So far, she was the only pony I cared about, apart from me, of course.

“Where have you been, Rose?”

“Me?” Rose grinned in joy. “I’ve been here in Nobuck, training hard to be able to defend myself without having to resort to Lavender.”

Well, at least now she called things by her name. That meant she was brave enough to face her own reality. She was growing up, and that made me feel better. Wait, was that a tear down my cheek?

“Are you crying, Farsight?” Rose asked, worried.

“It seems so...” I sniffed and smiled. “But don’t worry. It’s nothing bad. I’m just proud of you.”

“Thank you!” Rose smiled too. Then she remembered something and her expression changed to a moody face. “Farsight... I have to speak to you about something... if you don’t mind.”

“Tell me.” Rose wanted to talk about something serious, it seemed. What could it be?

“Could you tell me your plan? Because you have a plan, don’t you?”

I took a deep breath. Rose wasn’t your common filly. She had lived through so much, that she knew her way around ponies. Maybe she wasn’t as bright as me, but she had eyes and a brain behind them.

“My plan... Rose, I think I told you I strive for power. I want to be on top of the ladder, so that no pony can tread on me. Besides, I want to live a good life, a life better than the common junk that is the Wasteland. In any other place it would be a foolish dream, but here in Neighvada there is a paradise waiting for me. I want to enter New Pegasus and work my way up there.”

“And how is the NER going to help you in that?”

“I don’t know, but I want them to be in debt with me, sorry, with us. You’re no foal. You know they’re powerful, and that they’re bound to control this part of the Wasteland sooner or later. Therefore, it’s good to have them on your side. They might not open the doors of New Pegasus for me, but they will do something for me once all this is over.”

“All this?”

“Don’t you know? We’re going to take Freedom Field now.”

“What? What did you do this time, Farsight?” Rose’s tone was that of slight disappointment, with a hint of disbelief.

“I did... nothing. I had offered Dee a plan to defeat the Buckmares, but she twisted it and used it to turn them into their puppets with a swift blow. Then, they learned about the NER in Nobuck and decided to unite against us.”

“What about the population? The poor traders, the civilians?”

“They’re with the gangs. They’re not of our concern, anyway.” I sighed. I knew that Rose wouldn’t like to hear that, but it was how life went after all.

“And that means they’re expendable? Farsight, how can you be so soulless?”

“Soulless? It’s a war, Rose. When the megaspells turned Equestria into a Wasteland, what did you think that happened to the civilians?”

“But you don’t have to do this! You have a choice!”

She was right. I had a choice in this. And I had already made the decision.

“I do have a choice, and I’ve chosen to stand with the NER. However, this is not a war. The gangs have

decided to resist peacefully, so the Republic can't attack them without causing an uprising. Does that make you feel better?"

"Yes... I think so."

Did she, really? She looked at me with a really sad face, making my soul shiver. Rose was the only one that could actually do that, and that's why I loved her. She was the little voice that reminded me that there was hope for the righteous in the Wasteland. But I also needed her to realize that she had to have her hooves on the ground, or she would get killed.

"Rose, you've got to..."

"Farsight, sir!" A trooper came rushing to us, anguish in her face. "The Vice-President needs you in the Gummy, sir. It's urgent!"

Crap. So much for my speech. I left Rose in the training grounds and galloped to the Gummy building, where Harpsong was waiting for me with a stern face.

"Ah, Farsight, we were waiting for you. Please, come in." Her voice was cold and I could notice a hint of anger. Was it because of the alliance between the gangs? "Now that we're all gathered here, let's discuss how we'll tackle things, shall we?"

Stonetree was looking at the town maps deployed on one of the walls. His muzzle curled in disgust, and I heard him whisper something. However, I couldn't make out anything of what he said. The tone was cutting and dreadful, though. He wasn't happy at all, and when it came to Stonetree, I had the feeling that I knew what ground his gears.

"What is that non-violent resistance shit?" He roared at me. "Would you mind explaining that nonsense?"

"Captain, please. Don't lose your temper. Let's keep this meeting professional."

"It's simple, Captain Stonetree." I used a firm yet warm tone, in order to calm everypony in the room down as I made my explanations. "They won't surrender, but they won't fight either. They'll just stand there watching whatever we do to them."

"And since when is that a problem?"

"Since you're not freeing poor slaves or fighting bad raiders. The gangs, even if a little unorthodoxly, care about the population of Freedom Field. In fact, many civilians consider Dee Cleff a guardian angel for Freedom Field, while the labor of the Followers of the Shy attracts both inhabitants and Wastelanders."

"So, imagine what will happen if you break into their town killing and destroying." Harpsong had added a hint of irony to her statement.

"The Republic can't afford an uprising in a conquered territory. That's totally out of the question, isn't it?" I asked to Stonetree.

"It is." Stonetree huffed in anger. "Those hippies. I can't believe the Republic is going to stand idle to such provocation!"

"The Republic is not going to stand idle, Captain, that would be a mistake. However, I think we must change our approach to our problem with the gangs, don't you agree with me?"

"Are you suggesting espionage, Miss Vice-President? You know we don't have any spies in the area."

"I know, but we have agents, don't we?"

Stonetree and Harpsong looked at me at the same time. Stonetree's muzzle curled into a smug smirk, while Harpsong's face was one of triumph. I realized what they were planning. I was going to be sent back to Freedom Field to try and destabilize things.

"Let me guess," I said before anypony else talked. "I'm going back to Freedom Field."

"I've always liked your quick thinking, Farsight."

“Thanks, Harpsong.” I scowled. Somehow, I expected this outcome, but it didn’t mean I liked it. Freedom Field was like a loaded gun, one wrong movement and it would cost you your life.

“What are you planning to do, Vice-President?”

“I’m not planning anything, that’s the good thing about it!” Harpsong clapped. “I’m sending you on your own, Farsight.”

“On my own? What does that come down to?”

“You don’t have to report to us, first and foremost. Officially, you won’t belong to the NER, which means you won’t get paid. Sorry about that.”

Ouch. First one, right in the kisser. What would be the next surprise?

“You’re going in there with one purpose only. By next month, I want that city under my control. I don’t care what you do. You’re totally free as far as the NER is concerned. I don’t give a damn if you get in there and shoot everypony down. As long as I can march into Freedom Field without having to handle a revolt, I would be ready to endorse you as the fucking mayor.”

So this was it. Pretty much what I had supposed in the first place. Since the gangs didn’t want to fight, the NER wouldn’t fight either. Instead, they sent an agent of chaos to stir things up.

“So, I’ve got total freedom of action...” I smiled at the wide arch of possibilities. “You realize this could backfire at you, don’t you?”

“Backfire? That’s a risk I’m willing to assume.” Harpsong smiled. “Besides, you’re smart enough to know who you should support.”

“Of course, of course. I was just playing around.” I shrugged. Harpsong’s reaction had been calm but clear. Cross me and you’ll regret it. “Now, let’s get down to practical issues. You said something about next month?”

“Indeed. I’m giving you a month to get things running. If I don’t see a change in the situation by next month, you’re out of the NER. If you can’t even handle such a task, you’re not worthy of being an NER agent. Same goes to Rose and Nadyr. Since they came along with you, they’ll go with you if you fail. Understood?”

That last condition struck me like lightning. A month to break the gangs’ resistance or I’d lose all what I had been working for? I couldn’t afford that. I had moved across the Wasteland making gambits, sacrificing my position to get higher benefits. But this gambit could return me to the starting line, having lost much in the way. Even too much, maybe.

I felt anguish crawl back into my soul and grasp it tightly. The perspective of returning to the life of a Wastelander, having to struggle for survival, was something I had already forgotten and that I simply didn’t want to remember. Besides, now I had to take care of Rose as well, which would make my life much harder than the last time. Freedom Field was no safe place either, since the gangs knew me already and they would watch every single move I made. This was my final gamble. If I didn’t make it, I would have to start all over again.

“I understand.” I gulped. “Now, what about my companions?”

“You’re free to do as you wish. You three came together, so it’s your call.”

“I see. If there isn’t anything more you have to tell me, I will be leaving.”

I turned around to leave the room and the Gummy Building, when I heard Harpsong call me from behind.

“Farsight!”

“Yes?” I turned my head to look at her.

“Good luck. The Republic is counting on you.”

I nodded and turned around. They were counting on me, of course. However, they’d dump me if I didn’t reach any progress in one month. What sort of trust was that? I felt used, expendable. And even if in the very

deep I knew that this was the way of the Wasteland, I couldn't stop a growing resentment towards Harpsong and the NER. If they wanted to play rough sending me as their little piece of discord, I'd show them what I was capable of.

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The first thing I needed to do was to talk to Rose and Nadyr about the sudden change of events. I didn't worry about Rose, but maybe Nadyr wouldn't take it so lightly. Since our partnership wasn't being all that smooth, I had to be very careful when telling him about what the NER had ordered us. Even if I didn't fully trust the zebra, I was aware of his abilities and I knew they would come in handy someday. Therefore, I wanted to keep him around, no matter what.

I checked the canteen, as it had become quite a habit for Nadyr to chill there when he was off duty. This time, however, I didn't find him at his usual spot. Instead, he was training hardily in the rocky, jagged outskirts of Nobuck. When I reached him, he was doing two-leg pull-ups, dressed in nothing more than his underpants. While it didn't attract me at all, I had to admire my striped companion's physical shape. His dark gray and white body was very muscular, but it wasn't bulky. Instead, it was fibrous and slim, as if it had not a single cell too much. Besides, I had the feeling that Nadyr took a great care on keeping himself fit.

"Nadyr!" I called.

The zebra noticed me for the first time and stopped his exercise. Huffing and panting, he grabbed a towel from the rock where he had stored his clothes and started drying the sweat that had appeared on his slim, scarred body.

"Sup, Farsight" he greeted me.

"Wow, Nadyr. I didn't think you were so... fit."

"What? Are you one of those bucks whose barnyard door opens the other way round?"

"No, no, not at all." I laughed faintly. "I have other... deviations, but stallions are not my weakness."

"I'm glad to hear that, because I'm not one of those either."

"However, I must admit that your body looks stunning. You're really fit!"

"Damn, of course I'm fit, bro! Did you think my agility is a product of magic or something? I train really hard every single day to keep being tough as a fucking nail!"

"All right, there's no need to get all fired up." I shrugged.

"Dude, you should train a bit as well. Otherwise, you'll get all flabby and slow."

"Flabby and slow? It's not like I'm lying on a couch all day, Nadyr."

"Whatever. Don't come whining when you can't gallop without having your heart climbing up your throat."

"Never mind. This wasn't what I wanted to talk about."

Nadyr threw the towel and started putting his pants on, while humming some tune I didn't recognize. Was he even listening to me?

"What is it, then?"

"Our situation here has... changed." I walked up and down, rather nervously. "The gangs of Freedom Field have signed an alliance against the NER, but they have pulled out an intelligent trick. They've decided to resist in a non-violent way."

"Non-violent?" Nadyr chuckled. "Yeah, right. How will they stop an army in a non-violent way?"

"The bad news is that they already have. The NER won't attack."

"Say what?"

"You heard it. They won't attack, since they're afraid that their aggression might spark a popular revolt. The

folks at Freedom Field are quite sympathetic to the gangs.”

“I did have that feeling, yes.” Nadyr nodded. “I never thought they’d use the population as a shield.”

“They’re gangsters. What did you expect?”

“Duh. Of course.” Nadyr facehoofed and smiled. “So, what is our new situation?”

“They’ve decided to send me into Freedom Field to break their alliance. I’m going in on my own to try and sow the seeds of chaos. They’ve called it Operation Discord.”

“Pfft. Who names those things, anyway?”

“Beats me. That’s not my point, though. What worries me is that they’ve given me a month to destabilize the situation in Freedom Field, or we three will be fired.”

“Fired?”

“Yes, fired. As in no job, no money.”

“No money?” Nadyr whined. “Oh, no, no, no. I ain’t letting that juicy NER pay go. What can I do?”

“Nothing. Keep working for the Republic as usual.”

“I don’t get it. You expect me to do nothing and lose my pay?”

“I’ll give you two reasons, so choose the one that suits you best. If you come with me to Freedom Field, the NER will stop paying you, as it has stopped paying me. Once in Freedom Field, we’re no agents of the Republic. We’re on our own in there. That’s reason one. Reason two is the following: when I went back to the meeting, I had to tell them that the NER had wounded you and you had decided to lay low for a while. It wouldn’t be very logical if you went back into Freedom Field as if nothing had happened.”

“All right, it seems you don’t give me much of a choice.” He shook his head in disagreement. “As you wish, I’ll keep working for the NER, but mark my words. If I lose my pay because of your failure, I’ll destroy you. I swear.”

Another motivation to do a good job in Freedom Field, I thought. Nadyr was a cold blooded killing machine, so I just didn’t want to see him angry at me. I felt chills up and down my spine, and my throat became dry. I didn’t want to show him that I was afraid, so I tried to keep cold and serious.

“Fine. I’ll be leaving now, Nadyr. I really hope that we don’t have to get to that situation. Good luck and all that jazz.”

“Later.” Nadyr’s response was curt. Then, he turned around and picked his shirt from the floor. Our conversation was over.

I turned around and left without looking back. Nadyr wasn’t a friend, that was true, but I definitely didn’t want to have him as an enemy. Not if I wanted to have a long life in the Wasteland.

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Rose was strolling up and down Nobuck when I came back from my little chat with Nadyr. Day after day, she was less of a helpless filly and more of a full-grown Wastelander. She had one thing that many others didn’t, and that was the ability to quickly adapt to the situation without giving up her principles. I had the feeling that she would outlast many of the ponies that we had come across.

She spotted me as I got closer, and she waved a hoof and smiled. Her fiery red mane was covered with a shiny new blue beret with the insignia of a griffin head in it.

“Hello, Farsight!”

“Hello, Rose. I hadn’t seen that beret before... Where did you get it?”

“Do you like it?”

“It suits you. However, you didn’t answer my question.”

“All right...” she giggled. “I got it from one of the troopers. He gave it to me as a gift for healing him. I’ve been working in the field hospital for the last few days.”

“What does the insignia stand for?”

“If I recall correctly, the trooper told me that it was the insignia of Gawd’s Guns, the name of his company. I kept it because I thought it would be ungrateful to remove the insignia from the beret.”

“I understand.” I nodded. Rose’s firm principles were something that never ceased to amaze me.

“Oh, by the way, I saw you enter the Gummy Building some time ago. What happened? Were you called to a meeting or something?”

“Yes, Harpsong wanted me to report. Then, I got a new assignment. One that involves you as well.”

“Me?” Rose looked at me with a surprised face. “What is it?”

“We need to get back to Freedom Field. They have decided to resist peacefully to the NER’s advance, and that is something that makes both Harpsong and Stonetree very nervous.”

“What are we supposed to do? We can’t attack somepony who’s not violent.”

Rose had immediately grasped the situation, once again. This time, however, I was worried about how her principles would affect the way she saw our assignment. She had been in Freedom Field, she had seen how the gangs worked for the population. And since Rose was so kind, so virtuous; I had the feeling that she might not like to topple the gangs. However, she didn’t have much of a choice.

“We are going to work as covert agents there. Our mission is to destabilize the situation. Either we move them towards an agreement of submission to the NER, or we move them towards a violent stance, allowing the Republic to intervene.”

“But you’re going for the first, aren’t you?”

“I’m going for whatever I can get, Rose. We only have one month, or the Republic will dump us, and Nadyr didn’t seem too pleased about losing his pay.”

“I see...” Rose lowered her head, worried. “Then, what will we do?”

“For now, we’re leaving for Freedom Field. We can’t lose any minute.”

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It didn’t take us too much time to gather our stuff and leave Nobuck. After all, the most of our inventory was tidily packed in my saddlebags. We stopped by the canteen to get ourselves some rations for the trip to our destination, and left on the double. Every minute that I spent outside Freedom Field was a minute lost.

A storm of dust blew across the Wasteland, covering us in a dry, beige grit. The visibility was lower after every step we took, and it wasn’t the most pleasant way of traversing the roads, but we needed to push. We needed to get to Freedom Field.

“Farsight!” Rose yelled, so I could hear her. “We can’t stay out in the open! I can’t see anything, we could be ambushed by raiders!”

“If I can’t see them, they can’t see me either!” I yelled back, only to get a hoofful of dirt in my mouth. I coughed and spat.

“I don’t care! I can’t breathe without getting dirt in my nose! Let’s find someplace safe to stay!”

“But where?”

“I think I saw a marker on the map following the road we’re walking right now. I just don’t know if we’re far away. You should be able to see it in your PipBuck map, shouldn’t you?”

She was right. We needed to hide from the roaring storm before it smothered us in dust. Coughing and spitting sand, I tried to look at my PipBuck map. Even with the light at full power, I could only manage to fathom some contours on the screen. If I wasn’t mistaken, there had to be a small shack close to our position.

I started walking against the harsh wind, pushing against a wall of dirt. My PipBuck had started clicking nervously. There was radiation in the wind! We needed to find shelter as soon as we could!

“Rose!” I yelled as strong as possible. “I’ve found the place you talked about! It’s not far away! Follow me, follow the light of my PipBuck!”

I didn’t hear her response, as the sound of the roaring wind was deafening. I just prayed to Celestia for her safety, as I began to distinguish the contours of a small building in front of me. I pushed forward with all my might, as I had the feeling that our immediate survival was depending on getting into shelter. I managed to get close to the shack, since it wasn’t much more than that, and I slammed the door open. There was no time for subtleties.

I jumped into the room and landed on the floor, exhausted. Rose came behind me, closing the door after her. She fell to the floor, huffing and panting from the great effort. We didn’t know where we had ended up, nor did we care. We could finally rest our weary bodies. I took myself some time to recover my breath, and then I got up to check the shack. The place was dusty, as if no pony had lived here in a long, long time.

*\*BLEEP!* My PipBuck had been beeping ever since we got into the shack, but I had been too busy resting my bones to pay attention to it. Now, a bit fresher, I lifted my foreleg to check what my leg-attached device wanted to tell me. *You’ve discovered Neighvada Relay Wave Radio Station.* The name Relay Wave didn’t say anything to me, but the fact that this place was a radio station made it interesting. Who knows what we might find in here? But first, I had to make sure if the place was safe to stay.

“Anypony here?” I yelled. No response. This could mean that the place was empty or that we were being stalked. I picked my rifle from the saddlebag and cocked it.

The place was silent. Rose had fallen asleep in the very place she had landed, and the silence was only broken by the howling wind and the whirring noise of some electronic device. The shack was small, only a couple of rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a closet. I activated the E.F.S. Nothing. There were only two ponies in the area, those being Rose and me. I sighed in relief and holstered my rifle.

After having done that, I started checking the place more thoroughly. The kitchen was empty, probably raided by any Wastelander curious enough to enter the shack. The bathroom had a first aid box where I found a pack of bandages. But the thing that most interested me was the last room I checked. As the PipBuck said, it was a fully functional radio station.

The devices on the room emitted a faint static buzzing, since nothing was being caught by the receiver. The machinery of the station was fairly complicated, many chunks of buttons and dials, as well as microphones and speakers. With enough time, I could have learned to operate such an equipment, and who knows when it might have been useful; but now I had no time to worry about it.

Something caught my attention, though. Lying on one of the panels was a small piece of paper with a small diagram of the device and a series of numbers scribbled. Since Rose was still asleep and the storm didn’t seem to be ending anytime soon, I decided to try and discover what the numbers meant. The diagram drawn on the note was faulty and vague, but it made clear that it pointed at a knob with a dial right above. A quick inspection of the machine showed me that there was only one such knob that could show the numbers of the note in the corresponding dial, so I operated the knob to the first of the numbers, and music started ringing from the speakers. I realized that the dial symbolized the tuned frequency, so the numbers had to be stations. The first one was New Pegasus Radio, the news and music station of the City.

A small screen with the map of the area was attached to the big radio receiver. Once a signal was detected, its source point appeared on the map. When I locked on to New Pegasus Radio, the marker had been placed on a building in the City of New Pegasus. I kept looking for the rest of the stations. Many of them were blank signals, only static. Other ones kept playing emergency broadcasts from before the War, but one caught my attention. It wasn’t the classic static buzz. Instead, it was a series of clicks and clacks, something that made no sense at all, but that had some pattern. There was some logic to it... encrypted signals. That had to be it. I took a look at the locator screen, and I found to my surprise that the source was hovering over New Pegasus, shifting from one side to another. It didn’t point at any place in particular, but it would never leave the

contours of the city. What could that mean? Was that signal being broadcast from under the city? Or from above? I saved the frequency on my PipBuck memory, just in case I might need it.

“What are you doing, Farsight?” I heard Rose say behind my back. She was awake once again. I turned around and watched her yawn graciously. She was cute, I thought with a smile.

“Investigating,” I replied. “This place used to be a radio station, and somepony wrote down a series of working frequencies. Whatever this could be used for, anyway.”

“Maybe this will clear things up.” Rose handed me a small booklet.

I took a look at the book Rose had given me. It was a small hoofbook, thin and aged. It had to be from before the War. The covers were dark blue with a small emblem in the front cover: three balloons, two of them sky-blue and the other one yellow. The print in the cover was almost unreadable, but the a quick look to the first page made it clear: Relay Wave Radio Station, Operator’s Hoofbook. Property of the Ministry of Morale. So, this station had been commissioned before the War. Curiosity sparked in me, so I kept reading. The preface to the book was a small explanatory paragraph, succinct but very clear at the same time.

*Hello there,*

*If you are reading this, then it means you have been chosen to be the Operator of a Relay Wave Radio Station. Let me thank you from the bottom of my heart for the key role you are assuming from now on. The purpose of the Relay Wave System is simple. In the event of a national catastrophe, as the one we are drawing closer to, keeping the people’s hopes up is the top priority to the Ministry and the Government.*

*Therefore, the Ministry of Morale has decided to start the Relay Wave program, a series of Radio Stations distributed through all Equestria, to keep the population informed and entertained while the war goes on. You have been provided with top-class equipment to fulfil your duty as an Operator. The orders are simple. Please check the receiver-tracker device every short period of time, and in case the rest of the stations go silent, start your broadcast and keep it running until things get back to normal.*

*Equestria is counting on you.*

The rest of the book was nothing more than an instruction manual to the different devices in the station, such as the receiver-tracker that I had been using to find the frequencies in the area. Once again, this station was another one of those memories of the Old Equestria that surfaced every now and then in the Wasteland. Probably, the operator to this station never got to broadcast anything, since New Pegasus Radio still filled the waves on Neighvada.

“Where did you find this, Rose?” I asked.

“In a small cabinet close to the station room door. It was locked, but I managed to open it.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, does it surprise you? I was raised in the Wasteland, remember? You need to learn how to pick locks.”

“Indeed... I tried to pick one once. It was awful.” I smiled at the thought. Thank Celestia for that drill. “Mind showing me where it was?”

Rose pointed at a small locker, almost at floor level, close to the corner of the room. No doubt I had gone past it without noticing. I took a look at the locker. It was small, and there were some old records stored there. Most of them were classics and cheerful records, and there were some rarities lying around, like a collection of the “Hoofbeats Sessions” with Vinyl Scratch. That stash could be worth a big amount of money in the Trader Plaza of Freedom Field, so I decided to grab them. I had an idea in my mind.

“Why are you taking the records?” Rose asked, intrigued.

“I have an idea to start working our way in Freedom Field, and I’ll need your help.”

“Count on me.” Rose nodded with a smile. After all, she still was a filly and she liked helping the grownups.

“Are you used to bartering?”

“I’ve done some before. I’m not that good either.”

“It doesn’t matter. We need to make money while we’re in Freedom Field, so I’m going to resort to an old acquaintance of mine. You know, before I met you, I worked briefly as a scavenger-trader in town. With a bit of luck, maybe we can get you a stand to sell things.”

“To sell things? And how is that going to help you?”

“First, earning money to pay for beds and food. Second, for hearing gossip. Ponies talk a lot when they don’t think they’re being listened to.”

“So maybe the gangsters will talk about important things while looking for stuff at the market.”

That’s why I liked Rose. She definitely could grasp the ideas I tossed at her without having to explain too much. Once again, she had surpassed all my expectations.

“Exactly. Gossip that, in a similar way, could be used in this radio station.”

“Wait a minute, Farsight. Do you expect me to come and go all the way to tell the ponies in town what I’ve heard?”

“No, not you... It’s something I’m brewing right now in my mind. It might end up being nothing, though.” I waved a hoof to let it pass.

“All right...” Rose shrugged. “So, what is your plan this time?”

“Plan? I have no plan. I’ll improvise as I go.”

“I don’t believe you. You ALWAYS have a plan.” Rose stood on her hind legs to emphasize the word ‘always’.

“Not this time, Rose. My only plan is to get a grip on the situation. From there on, I’ll have to adapt to the events.”

“That doesn’t sound much like you, Farsight.”

“I know... but look at it this way. Had I planned on meeting you in the Wasteland? Had I planned on joining Nadyr to our team? Had I planned on switching sides to the Republic? Had I planned that I’d be sent back to Freedom Field to unleash chaos? The answer to all of them is a big fat ‘no’, and they have been key events in our recent lives, haven’t they?”

“Well, yes, but what is your point?”

“My point is that plans are always subject to external things, circumstances we can’t control. To those, you just have to adapt... or perish.”

“That was a bit too gloomy, wasn’t it?” Rose shivered.

“Maybe.” I nodded with a smile.

Silence filled the room once again, since our conversation had come to an abrupt end. I noticed that the storm wasn’t shaking the shack’s walls anymore, so we were good to go once again. I trotted back to the main door and opened it. The exit was partially blocked by a knee-tall layer of sand, but it didn’t mean too much for me. Rose, on the other hand, needed my help to climb out. We locked the door of the shack and returned to the road.

Ahead of us was Freedom Field, and also a long month of hard work.

#

Note: Reputation Change

New Equestrian Republic: Willingly unknown. Although the ponies on this faction know you, they will deliberately deny it as long as the circumstances don’t change.



## Chapter 7: Everybody Wants To Rule The World

*“Good night everypony! This is New Pegasus Radio, taking you through the night, and I’m your host, Mister New Pegasus, directly for your ears. I know that New Pegasus never sleeps, but I’m so delighted to know we have so many listeners even after dark. You’ve just listened to Sweetie Belle and the Equestrian Philharmonic Orchestra in one of the most amazing recordings ever made. I’m glad you can’t see me right now, because I’m crying like a little foal. Such magnificent beauty!*

*In breaking news, the situation in Freedom Field has become really tense in the last hours. The information we have is still blurry, but it appears that the gangs are getting ready to wage war. And when I mean war, I mean all out war, everypony! According to the NPPD, the whole city is being transformed into massive barracks. Some voices speak about trenches being built, arms being deployed and patrols on the walls. Even if everything has gone silent by now, we’re issuing a safety warning here. Please, if you have to do business in Freedom Field, take good care of yourselves, folks.*

*However, here at New Pegasus Radio we’d like to have some more information on the happenings of tonight, so please, if anypony can let us know what exactly is taking place in the Freedom Field Shuffle, as a colleague here at the station called it, please, send us a message and let us know.*

*The New Pegasus City Board has decided not to intervene in the issue, since the battle has taken place outside the walls of the city and no actual Citizen was involved. Even though it’s a sensible decision according to both common sense and the Laws of New Pegasus, this humble reporter here thinks that if things start to go wild in Freedom Field, sooner or later they will affect the City as well. I don’t want to question the City Board’s decision. I just want to send out a warning to anypony listening out there.*

*On to an update on the Ferratura murder! According to the last press bulletin issued by NPPD Chief Investigator Brass Badge, the police investigators found the suspected murder weapon in the dumpster close to the city walls, next to the New Equestrian Republic Embassy. The weapon was a standard issue Ironshod Firearms nine millimeter Wildbuck pistol. However, all identification numbers had been scraped from the weapon, and the pistol itself had been dismantled and the pieces scattered around the dumpster. The investigators are performing tests on the gun for traces of DNA or magical signatures. We’ll keep you informed.*

*Out there things are moving as well. It seems that the work of the NER in Neighvada is starting to bear its fruit. Reports of caravaneers and traders tell us that the deserted village of Pipton was secured by Republican troops and is now inhabited by pioneers from across the Divide. Now, it has flourished into a promising trading post and resting place for hard-working ponies out in the Wasteland. Even if somepony might think that the NER is trying to peacefully assimilate us, I support their job bringing peace and civilization to this battered world. Thank you!*

*Now, let’s keep going through the Neighvada night with some music, shall we? I’ve been playing Sweetie Belle’s music for a long time now, but I happened to find a really surprising recording in a trader’s stand last week. Did you know Sweetie Belle started a band with her fillyhood friends? I bet you didn’t know. Well, here it is. Open your ears to hear this musical rarity, “Trot this way” by Run-CMC! This is New Pegasus Radio, and I’m your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking right to your souls...”*

The Wasteland shone with a weird light.

I don’t know if it was a consequence of the storm that had ravaged this part of the world for the last hours, but now the sunlight that sipped through the cloud cover gave the Neighvada Wasteland an eerie look. The air glowed in unnatural tones of orange, gold and red, as if a translucent curtain had been drawn right before my eyes.

“It looks beautiful, doesn’t it?” Rose asked.

“It is breathtaking.” I nodded. “However, beautiful is not the word I’d use. There’s something eerie about the

looks of the Wasteland right now. As if we were walking in the middle of a nightmare.”

“A nightmare?” Rose chuckled. “How can you think about this right now? It’s nature at its finest!”

“Indeed, it’s fine.” I smiled at her. I was feeling nervous for a reason I didn’t manage to understand. “But there’s something odd about this storm. It came out of nowhere, so suddenly... It wasn’t a common storm.”

“How can you tell that? You’re a Stable Pony!”

“I don’t have to be a Stable Pony to know that something so big and so violent can’t pop out of the thin air. It needs to breed, to grow. And that didn’t grow. It just happened, boom, just like that.”

“I’m sorry to tell you that you’re wrong, my dear Farsight!” Rose squeed, just like a filly when proving a grownup wrong. It was heartwarming. “I’ve lived through more than one of these sandstorms. Every now and then, they sweep Neighvada from West to East. Always from West to East. I don’t know more about them, but they happen randomly. Therefore, they’re natural.”

“All right. You’re the Wastelander here.” I smiled and gave Rose a friendly pat in the back.

“Exactly. Now let’s get moving.”

Rose sped up, forcing me to follow her suddenly hasty pace. I wasn’t in a bad shape, but the bulky armor and the load of my saddlebags made it a tough ordeal not to lose track. After almost a whole day of trotting across the eerie golden Wasteland, we made it to Freedom Field. The guards at the gates were very surprised to see us enter the city unharmed.

“We weren’t expecting anypony after the storm, and less coming from the South!” the baffled guard exclaimed. “How did you manage to do it?”

“We were lucky to find shelter.” I shrugged, giving less importance to our arrival than the one the guards were giving it. “That’s how we managed to survive the storm.”

“Then you’re a lucky couple! There are many caravaneers that won’t have made it through this one.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I was lying, but courtesy was always a good weapon. “What is wrong with these storms, though? I had never heard about them before.”

“They’re fairly random... the truth is the last one happened a long time ago. However, you never know when or where a Divide Storm is going to hit.”

“A Divide Storm?” That name again. Harpsong had spoken about Divide Pass... or had it been Forger?

“Yes. A storm that blows from the Divide, from the West of Neighvada. They’re usually very local, like a beam of wind and sand shooting from the Divide to the Coltorado. This one hit south of New Pegasus. We didn’t even notice until the reports of the caravans came in. Also, a couple of griffin escorts were able to make it out alive by flying. The greatest danger is to be smothered by the sand.”

“More than radiation?” I asked.

“More. The amount of rads you can get from Divide air, at least at the vicinity of New Pegasus, is very low. The sand is a far more present danger.”

“That’s why we were so lucky of finding shelter!” Rose smiled again.

“Indeed, young miss!” The guard smiled at Rose. “Well, get in. I don’t want to entertain you anymore, since I presume you’ll be tired after all you’ve been through.”

“Thanks.” I nodded and walked past the guard post. The gates of Freedom Field opened before us, once again.

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I was surprised at the sight of Freedom Field. The last time I had crossed the gates, I came across a fortress under construction, with trenches, barricades, firing posts and supply lines. Now, after the decision of a peaceful resistance had been taken, all the remains of the defensive emplacements were nothing more than a

couple of lousy barricades close to the entrance gate, not too different to the ones that stood before all the preparations.

Besides, something else had changed in the township. The last time I was there, the activity was frantic, with ponies galloping around in their different tasks. Now, the place had sunken into some sort of stasis, as if the time had stopped still after the gang leaders had decided not to fight the Republic. Where all was haste and diligence, now it was nothing more than sloth and indolence. However, to be honest, this was the logical look of Freedom Field.

Rose trotted before me, looking at every single thing that moved in the streets. Rose had one great virtue that she had been developing ever since we met. She looked at things with a perfect mixture of fillyish, open-minded curiosity and an analytic mind, trained both by me and the NER. Now, she was profiting of it. I looked at her while she noticed the different emblems of the goons, the places to hang around, the looks of the ponies in town... She had grasped her quest of becoming a spy, and was already gathering all the information she could manage.

I led Rose to our first destination, the open-sky square of Trader Plaza. The place hadn't changed much from the last time I was here. The stands were crammed into small makeshift passages, where the ponies offered their wares at, as every single vendor said, the best prices in all of Neighvada. Of course, the adjacent stand had a better price, most of the times. I quickly trotted towards my former place close to Sunny Orchard's Vegetable Emporium, raising a silent prayer to Luna for an empty stand close to it.

"Of all the ponies in the Wasteland, you had to come back." Sunberry welcomed me with a cold face. Was she still hurt for my decision?

"Hi there, Sunberry." I smiled faintly, slightly ashamed. "How are you feeling?"

"I can't complain. My sales have increased lately, mostly because of the failure of the communal farming programs, remember that?"

"Yes, I remember that. I still can't believe that a Water Talisman would have saved their farms."

"It would have. The poor farmers didn't get anything to sprout because of the dry lands. If they had obtained the Water Talisman, they would have been able to irrigate the crops."

"Really? I don't think so."

"Explain yourself!" Sunberry yelled in anger. Small teardrops were starting to surface in her big, honey-colored eyes.

"Sunberry, the Water Talisman needs an infrastructure to work properly. It needs piping, flow control systems, emergency overrides... Trust me, I know what I'm talking about. I've worked with talismans. I seriously doubt a bunch of farmers could set up such an infrastructure."

"And the gangs have?"

"Well, they're using the former infrastructure. My bet is that they've done some sort of bypass in the original piping and that they've installed the Talisman there. It's a bit of an ordeal, but by far easier than what the NER would have had to do to get their farms running."

"Besides," Rose spoke for the first time, "why didn't they start the farms close to lake Honeymead?"

"What?" Sunberry looked puzzled at the filly's question. "Lake Honeymead?"

"Yes, the big lake on the flow of the Coltorado, to the East! The water is clean and good for drinking. Why didn't they start the farms over there?"

"Who is she?" Sunberry asked.

"She's Desert Rose. She comes with me since our paths met in the Wasteland. She's got a fine eye for making clever remarks." I smiled. "So you'd better listen to whatever she says."

Sunberry looked past me and to the filly, who smiled proudly at the farmer mare. I was expecting some sort of smug retort from Sunberry, since I had assumed she had grown to dislike me, but suddenly her face turned

into a blushing squeal.

“Oh sweet Celestia!” she clapped her hooves. “What a sweet, sweet filly!”

“Thank you, miss...”

“Sunberry Grass. Oh, how cute!”

“Thanks, miss Grass. You’re too kind. But please, don’t be too harsh on Farsight. You and I know that he does things selfishly, but he’s a good pony. He has honor. I can vouch for him.”

I felt surprised at Rose’s stern declaration of confidence. I had the feeling that she was losing that appreciation she had for me because of my last actions. However, this was totally unexpected. I refrained from hugging Rose, since it would have been quite a melodramatic scene. Instead, I smiled and gave Rose a soft pat on the back.

“Why, Rose...” Sunberry doubted. “If you say so... sorry, Farsight.”

“Never mind, Sunberry. You had your reasons, I had mine. That’s how we all work. That’s how the Wasteland works. Even the NER’s farms will have ulterior reasons.”

“Sure... What brings you two here?”

“Is the stand beside yours free?” I asked, pointing at the empty stand where I had begun my business.

“It is. No pony has claimed it yet.”

“Great! Because I do!” Rose leapt onto the stand counter.

“What are you going to sell?” Sunberry asked, surprised.

“Scavenged goods, of course!” Rose replied with a vital smile.

“So you’re continuing with Farsight’s business... I should have seen it coming.” Sunberry smirked.

“Now, speaking of which...” I intervened, “I’d like you to keep an eye out for her, help her learn the tools of the trade. She’s just a filly, so I assume that many ponies around won’t take her too seriously. That’s why we need you, Sunberry.”

“You come asking for help, Farsight, after what you did?”

“Yes, I do. I thought you had forgiven me, Sunberry.”

“I have forgiven you, but that doesn’t give you the right to ask for favors, Farsight.”

“Come on, Sunberry, do it for her...” I staged a sad face, which Rose mimicked immediately.

Sunberry looked at me, then at Rose, and her muzzle curled. She was trying to hide the tears that Rose’s heartbreaking face was causing her. It was a real shame that Rose was so straight and honor-bound. She could have turned out to be a scam artist.

“Awww... Alright. I can’t say no to that face, so you can stop now, Farsight.”

“Thanks, Sunberry. Thank you so much.”

“Never mind, Farsight.” Sunberry shooed me with a wave of her hoof, while nudging at Rose to get behind the counter.

“Well, Rose.” I walked to the empty stand and looked at the filly with a tender smile on my face. “Learn as much as you can from Sunberry. Search every single apartment, and try to loot as much as you can. You never know what might sell well. I’m going to pull some strings here and there, to get ourselves somewhere to sleep. I’ll be back at night, okay?”

“Understood, Farsight! And don’t worry, I know what I have to do.”

“I don’t doubt that. See you later!”

I was about to turn around and leave when a wall of caramel-coloured feathers locked me into a tight hug.

There was no need to look at who the griffin in question was.

“Hi, Stuka.” I said, half smothered by the young griffin’s hug.

“Hello, honey!” she cooed, and then kissed me on top of my head, gently touching my horn. I had a shiver of pleasure down my spine. Horns can be quite sensitive.

“Not now, dear. There are ponies watching...” I whispered.

“I know, silly!” Stuka chuckled and let me go. “I was just playing around with you. I love to see you embarrassed.”

“Aw, great.” I smiled, wiping all embarrassment from my face. If she wanted to play, I would play. “How are you, honey?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Sunberry yelled. “HONEY?”

“Farsight... Who is she?” Rose asked, puzzled.

“Oh, please. Where are my manners.” I smiled at all the female audience that was gravitating around me at the moment and thought on an elegant way out of this situation. “Ladies, this is Stuka Talonblade. She and I... well, we have a sort of relationship. Not the usual love story, but it’s something alright.”

“Hi there!” Stuka winked an eye to Sunberry and Rose. Their reactions were different. While Rose smiled back and seemed pleased to meet the griffin, Sunberry was looking at me with a smug face.

“Stuka, these are Sunberry Grass and Desert Rose. Rose is my protégé, I saved her from a bunch of raiders out in the Wasteland and took her along with me. Sunberry is a local trader who’s helping Rose along with her business.”

“My pleasure, Stuka!” Rose cheered. “Farsight’s friends are my friends!”

“Well, that was the most unexpected thing of the day.” Sunberry smirked. “Congratulations, Farsight, you never cease to amaze me.”

“We’ll be leaving now, alright?” I smiled and looked at Stuka while nudging away. We could have a calm chat away from Rose and Sunberry. “Later, Rose. Sunberry...”

“See you later, loverbuck.” Sunberry smiled ironically. I was starting to have the feeling that she didn’t hate me anymore. She just found me as a massive, walking contradiction on four hooves.

I turned around, this time for good, and left Trader Plaza with Stuka following me closely. Once away from the market, I looked at Stuka, grabbed her and gave her a passionate kiss. She had me excited from the very beginning.

“Sorry about that, Stuka.” I shrugged. “I hadn’t told you about Rose, I hope you don’t take it badly...”

“Badly?” she laughed out loud. “Honey, Rose is the most adorable thing I’ve ever seen. She’s like you in many things, but so different in many others... I think we’ll get along well, as long as she doesn’t get a crush on you.”

“For now, she sees me as a father figure, or so I think. Maybe later, in a few years... But that’s far away from now. Why should we worry?”

“Exactly. Why should you?” She caressed me with one of her big wings, making me shiver. “Now, why don’t you come to Mama Stuka’s nest for a bit of tender love and care?”

I smiled at the proposition, it was one of the things that I wanted at the moment. The destabilization plan could wait a little longer, couldn’t it?

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“Whoa, Stuka... you’ve learned new tricks, haven’t you?” I gasped.

I felt sweaty and tired, and my lungs fought to absorb the oxygen from the air I was showing into them. My body was in pain, hardened by the tough effort Stuka had demanded. However, I was enjoying the moment.

Stuka's 'nest' was a small flat in one of the penthouse floors of the apartment buildings close to the Four Little Diamonds. She had cleaned the dirt, repaired the windows and decorated the place turning an old, gritty flat into a nice place to live in. Now I was lying on a griffin-sized bed, my sweat dripping onto the wrinkled sheets.

"Never show all your cards in your first move, honey!" She smiled and caressed me once again, making me shiver in delight.

"That's a great policy, you know?"

"Of course it is! Now come here, I'm not finished with you!"

"Stuka, I don't know if... uhhhn."

I was close to blacking out from the pleasure I was feeling at the moment. Stuka knew my weak spots and how to exploit them, rendering me useless. I didn't want to confront her, though. I just let her do her thing while I let the chills flow through my body. The sounds went dim, so Stuka's moans rang muffled and distant. I closed my eyes, since I was just lacking the energy to keep them open. Then, I stopped feeling. I simply slid into a limbo of silence and, surprisingly enough, peace.

"Honey... are you asleep?" Stuka whispered in my ear.

"Errr... what again?" I asked, still confused.

"You fell asleep while we were making love!" she smiled. "You had to be tired indeed."

"How long has it been?" I almost jumped out of the bed. I couldn't waste an entire day fooling around!

"Don't worry, dear! You just blacked out for an hour. After having given me one hell of a ride, I must add!" She winked an eye seductively.

"My pleasure." I started dressing up patiently, latching my armor piece by piece. "By the way, what's the news in the Diamonds?"

"Well, Saddle seems all fired up about something. He won't let us know about what it is, but he secludes himself in his office for hours."

"Really? That sounds like some kind of plan brewing to me."

"Same goes for me, honey. I don't know what to say, honestly. After the meeting we all had some time ago, I thought Saddle was done for. With all the drug production cut down to almost nothing, I never thought he'd be so active."

"That sounds worrisome, doesn't it?"

"Why worrisome?"

"Saddle is highly militaristic, if I'm not mistaken. In the meeting, he was willing to go out and fight the NER. Him being active worries me."

"I see where you're going, but I don't think that is going to happen. As long as Golden Swallow keeps him on a short leash, Saddle is nothing more than a lot of bark and no bite."

"Still, that doesn't make me less worried. Goldie is not precisely the most trustworthy pony in the world."

"I think Goldie was the one that proposed the idea of non-violence."

"So what?"

"So I think it would be rather incoherent for her to dump her principles and start a war."

"I hope so, for the good of all of us."

In the very deep, I didn't care all that much, because if Saddle started a war against the NER my job would have been done. I would be able to return to Nobuck with a broad smile and the certainty of having a career in the Republic, as long as I kept my professional relationship with Harpsong in a buoyant state. However,

there was something refraining me from endorsing that plan. It lacked the challenge, it was too easy. It didn't appeal me at all.

"So, what are you up to, darling?"

"I can't tell you, Stuka. You're working for Saddle."

"Oh, is it a nasty, nasty plan against grumpy old Saddle?" Stuka talked to me as if I was a foal. I smiled at her cute face. Griffin cute.

"No, nothing like that. It's that Saddle and I don't get along. I tend to align more towards Dee and the Stringers, and I have the feeling that Saddle doesn't pair up with the fellows at the Music School too well either."

"Yes, but I'm not Saddle, am I?"

"No. You're far hotter." I winked.

"Are you asking for another ride?" Stuka giggled.

"As much as I'd love to, no. I've got other things to do. Otherwise, we could go on and on until one of us fainted. Which, by the looks of things, would be me."

"Awww, come on, darling, tell me what you're up to."

"I'll tell you, but just because you ask it like that. I'm going to meet Dee, or at least Metronome. There are some things that must be cleared before I can do anything else. Besides, Rose and I need a place to sleep while we live here, and I think she can give us that."

"Why don't you bring her over?"

"Stuka, I said sleep. And while I don't care about myself, I do care about Rose. And I don't think she'll be sleeping too much here."

"Fine, fine." Stuka raised her talons and shrugged. "You've got your point there. Just... remember to pop by to say hello, all right?"

"I will, don't worry." I kissed her gently and walked away. "See you later, Stuka."

"Later, hon."

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I got back to street level a couple of blocks away from the main gate to the Four Little Diamonds, and I noticed the wry looks the Buckmare goons were giving me. I had the feeling that I wasn't at all unknown in Freedom Field, and that big buck Buckmare considered me a threat. To be totally honest, having your lover living close to your greatest enemy in town was a bit of a risky gamble. However, I was rather confident that they wouldn't attack me, at least not without prior provocation. If they knew me, they had to know about my partial affiliation to the Stringer gang, which acted as a great dissuading force.

"Gentlecolts..." I greeted, nodding gently.

No response, only a plethora of menacing gazes from the punks in the street. My salute hadn't been the wisest thing I had done in the day, that was true. However, it prompted an idea in my mind. A civil war would be another possible option to break the stalemate of the situation in Neighvada. If the gangs started fighting each other, the NER could come in as a pacifier, either by itself or supporting one of the gangs.

Needless to say, that solution was far more dangerous both for me and for Rose. For Stuka, on the other hand, it was a plain death warrant. Being the bodyguard of one of the gangs, there was a hoofful of possible outcomes that ended up with her dead. And I didn't want that to happen. Not by any chance. Therefore, I would have to look for another way of breaking the union between gangs.

That way meant diplomacy and scheming. Guns aside, there was not much more to do. Since the alliance between gangs was clearly split in two fronts that were close to breaking, there were two possible sides I could try to influence. On the one hand, there were the bellicist Buckmares, which hated me with the

intensity of a thousand suns. On the other hand, the Stringers, whose second in command had sent an assassin to kill me and Rose. While none of them were precisely friendly, I preferred to make things up with Metronome and Dee. They were the ones that wanted a peaceful agreement with the NER in the first place. After all, they were forced to accept Goldie's intermediate solution in order to avoid a greater evil. I believed that they were the ones that most fit into the Republic's ideology, and I had the feeling that maybe, only maybe, the Stringers would accept integrating into the NER.

I walked all the way to the Music School with my mind lost in my thoughts and plans, but truth be told, I had no idea about how things would develop from this very moment on. I was hoping on having the chance to speak with Dee and make things clear, although the little pony in my head was preparing me for another showdown with Metronome. Anyway, I would have to play with the cards I had.

The bell above the entrance door chimed lightly as I walked into the warm, fuzzy lobby of the school. With the new peace, the place was thriving, as a long line of colts and fillies sporting different instruments waited for a lesson. Some of them looked especially neat and tidy, which made me think that the high society of New Pegasus sent its descendants to Freedom Field to get cultivated. It was a funny sort of symbiosis, indeed. I walked to the counter in the middle of the room and greeted the secretary mare with a gentle nod.

"Good day, sir." She smiled, very professionally, while she filed some folders.

"Same to you." I smiled back. "Is Miss Cleff available right now? Or at least Metronome?"

"Miss Cleff is busy giving lessons, as you can notice." She pointed at the long line of young ponies waiting for Dee to teach them how not to produce eldritch noises when playing them. "However, Metronome should be in her room right now. Should I call her?"

"It won't be necessary. I'll go find her."

"Fourth room to the right on the second hallway of the second floor. Knock first."

"Of course. Thanks for the information."

I trotted calmly upstairs, leaving the legion of foals behind me. Their discordant noise echoed through the long corridors of the Music School as I made my way to Metronome's room. To be honest, I would have had a hard time finding the room if it hadn't been for the secretary's help. The hallways were all so similar, without any distinctive decorations that helped me difference one from the other, and the place was enormous.

I finally made it to the fourth room to the right on the second hallway of the second floor. There were no distinctive signs that revealed the ownership of the room, so there was no way of knowing if it was the right room. I shrugged and knocked gently.

"Metronome?" I asked.

No response. The door wasn't closed, so it moved slowly after I knocked it. I got a clear sight of Metronome's room. The blinds were partially closed, leaving the room in a slight penumbra, but I could see that the place was a small bedroom with a bed in the middle, a closet on one side and a table on a corner. Next to the bed, there was a rack on which a checkerboard piece of clothing was hung. If I wasn't mistaken, that had to be Metronome's dress. That being the case, where was Metronome?

I walked slowly into the room, almost creeping. I even brought my Eyes-Forward Sparkle to the front, looking for signs of life. There was one, not hostile, on the bed. I kept moving forward and understood what happened. Metronome was lying on the bed... fully naked. I felt a sudden chill when I gazed at her white coated flanks. Her cutie mark was a swinging metronome, shining in black and wood-brown over the gleaming white fur.

Many ideas crossed my mind at the moment. My body was still weary from my early morning exercise with Stuka, but Metronome was very attractive. Also, it wasn't too civilized to sneak up on her with the intentions I had in mind. However, I wasn't going to walk away. If she was to catch me in such a situation, I preferred to be caught admiring her than sneaking away like a foal who's done something wrong.

I had a mean idea cross my mind, and in a bit of a risky move, I decided to pull it off. I concentrated on making a soft pressure spell. My horn lit the room in a dim blue light while I started to massage Metronome's body, soft and carefully.

"Mhmmmm... awww..." she moaned.

I had to fight to keep silent. She wasn't asleep anymore, but she was clearly enjoying the moment. What was going to happen when she opened her eyes and found me in her room, I frankly didn't care. Well, maybe I should have cared, but I didn't. I just kept applying pressure to Metronome's body while I fought my impulses to lay a hoof on her.

"Oh... so... good..." she mumbled with a smile on her face.

I smiled too. I had finally controlled my anxiety, and was caressing her carefully from a distance. Her face showed how much she was liking my massage, and I was now thinking on what to do when she finally opened her eyes. I could play fancy or even seductive, but I could just excuse me saying I thought she looked tired and that she could profit from a bit of care. While I was considering the different options, Metronome twitched and opened one eye. She lifted her glasses with her magic and looked at me through them. Then, her expression changed to something between amazement and disbelief.

"Farsight?" she gasped.

"Yes. It's me."

"And what the hell do you think you're do... uh... doing?"

"What does it look like, Metronome?"

"Well... uh... you sneak into my room with me naked and you start... oh... you start fondling with my body... It looks like something dirty and lowdown to me."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Metronome. I just thought that such a lovely body needed some serious care."

"And you were here to deliver, weren't you?"

"I happened to be visiting, yes." I smiled archly.

"What a coincidence."

Metronome got up, slothfully, stretching her gracious body. Since she usually hid under wide dresses and packed her mane in a topknot, her sheer attractiveness was concealed. Probably, it was a tactic to draw all the spotlights to her boss, Dee. She walked all the way to me, looking at me with a mean face. Her body waved gently with every step she took. She got so close I could feel her warm breath on my muzzle.

"Now, I have been taught to be thankful and to repay any favor, gift or not." She licked her lips. "However, don't get me wrong. This is nothing more than a compensation. Don't think there are any feelings attached."

Metronome kissed me in a passionate way, even more passionate than any kiss Stuka had given me. It was hard to believe there were no feelings to it.

"Come on, Metronome." I smiled and looked at her with an amused expression. "Don't tell me you haven't felt anything."

"Farsight, don't you dare to get lovey on me."

"Who said I was talking about love? I felt your passion, your body twitching, your warm breath, your heartbeat... You must have felt that too."

"That's just bullshit, Farsight. Quit it." Metronome looked away with a pissed face.

"Really. Bullshit, you say."

I got up and walked towards her. She was sitting in silence, looking towards an undetermined point in the far wall of the dark room. I got closer and kissed her gently in the horn. If her horn was as sensitive as mine, she would really feel that.

“What are you doing?” She shivered. Bingo.

I said nothing and kissed her again, this time moving my tongue in quick circles around her horn, caressing it in a hot and damp embrace. Metronome started twitching and shivering as I kissed and licked every spot of her sensitive horn.

“Farsight... ugh... no... stop it... please!” she panted.

I paid no attention to her demands, since I was enjoying the moment greatly. It wasn't that much of a sexual pleasure. Instead, what made me feel good was having her proven wrong so easily. She tried to back off from my little trick, but she only managed to trip and fall to the floor. She was huffing and blushing heavily.

“Didn't you feel anything, Metronome?” I asked with a naughty smile.

“All right...” She smiled too, while fighting to recover her breath. “I felt something... and it was great.”

I put myself in top of her and whispered seductively to her ear.

“Last one was a compensation. Now, let's do it... with feel.”

She had tried to get up, but in a sudden move, I swept her hooves from the floor and toppled her. Before she could even recover from the impact, I unlatched my armor and gave her a malicious smile. She smiled back, aware of what was coming next, while I silently prayed to Celestia. My body would have to endure another round of a sweet, sweet punishment.

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Daylight sipped into the room through the half-closed blinds. Metronome and I were lying on the floor, still embraced, encircled by the pieces of my leather armor. She smiled once again and freed herself of my hooves. Then, she sat on her hind legs and used her magic to bring a box of cigarettes and a lighter. She lit one and started smoking with slow, slothful puffs.

“Do you want one?” she asked.

“Nope. I don't smoke.”

“Damn, Farsight. You're going to make me run out of smokes.”

“That's why you should stop smoking.” I rubbed my hoof up and down her belly.

“No, that's why I'm going to have to buy more.”

“OK, have it your way.”

“I suppose you won't speak a word about this, will you?”

“My lips are sealed.” I slid my forehoof along my mouth.

“Good. Because I think your griffin marefriend wouldn't like to hear about our meeting.”

“She won't hear. At least from me. Although I've need to know if she's one of the jealous kind.”

“Trust me, you don't want to find out if a griffin is jealous.”

“One of these days, I'll end up finding out. What I'm not so sure about is if it will be willingly or by coincidence.”

“Well, at least you're preparing for the shock. Even if I don't think anything can prepare you for an angry griffin.”

“You've got your point there.” I smiled.

“Good. We have an understanding, then.” She finished her cigarette and got up. She grabbed the dress and the underwear from the rack and began dressing. I did the same with my armor.

“Now that we've got so intimate, Metronome, I think we should make things clear.”

“Which things?”

“Nadyr.”

“What about him?”

“You sent him to kill me.”

She stopped dead, with her checkered dress still hanging in midair. The room became silent for an instant that seemed to last forever, until I decided to break that silence.

“Don’t worry. I’m not mad at you, I’ve been over that part already. I’ve learned that treason is the usual coin in the Wasteland. He’s fine, I spared his life. You just need to know that he and I are partners now.”

“Partners?”

“Partners, as in business partners. We go fifty-fifty on earnings.”

“Oh, I understand. I’m not going to ask you how you managed to convince that greedy zebra.”

“The same way you convinced him to kill me, money. Which, I have to admit, was a masterful move from your side, Metronome. There were few ways that I could have gotten out alive.”

“You’re a lucky bastard, Farsight.” She smiled and winked.

“Maybe. And you are a smoking hot schemer. Just the kind of mare that turns me on.”

“Stop fancy-talking, Farsight...”

“Come on, Metronome. I’m not fancy-talking. This one is honest praise, trust me. Actually, I’m quite surprised that you keep playing second fiddle.”

“Are you implying I should betray Miss Cleff?” Metronome’s muzzle curled in anger.

“No, no.” I shook my head. “I never meant that. I wanted to know why you haven’t thought on going independent. You’ve got the skills for that.”

“I owe much to Miss Cleff. She picked me up from the gutter when I was nothing more than a homeless filly and rose me as a younger sister. I’ve learned every single thing about this world from her, and the only thing she asks in return is loyalty and respect. I’d rather die than betray her. Period.”

“All right, I’m sorry for asking that. I never thought it would be such an important matter to you. Please forgive me.”

“You had no way of knowing.” She sighed. “Just forget about it.”

Metronome slid the dress down her neck, hiding her attractive body from the world once again, then she started tinkering with her mane.

“Thanks for the honest praise, though. Speaking about Nadyr, where is he right now?”

“Who, Nadyr? Why the sudden interest?”

“Because I want to know where my money went.”

“Ow, Metronome. That is rude. I thought you actually cared about him.” Irony filled my voice.

Metronome laughed. He had already finished wrapping her mane in a topknot and was locking it in position with a bunch of bobby pins.

“Yes, I care a lot about Nadyr. One hell of a lot. Where is he now?”

“As far as I know, he keeps working for the NER, so he should be stationed in Nobuck. He won’t be coming back until he knows he’s safe. And besides, they’re paying him quite well.”

“What does he think? We are not like the fucking Buckmares. We don’t kill our mercs if they fail. We just don’t pay. Which would link with your second reason. Anyway, I think it’s better for him to keep away from Miss Cleff for a while. Nadyr’s salary was frankly high, and I don’t think Miss Cleff’s going to like seeing him around in a while.”

“I see your point.”

“Of course you see my point. It’s just too obvious not to see it. Is there anything else you need to tell me?”

“Yes. In Nobuck, we were forced to work for the NER in order for them to spare our lives. They sent me here to try and break the alliance you forged.”

“Really? And why do you tell me this? That’s rather bold of you, not to say totally insensible.”

“Why? The way I see it, I’m a mercenary. I work for myself, not for others, and I manage myself in terms of convenience. Look at Nadyr, he will work for the one that pays him most. I don’t think that’s insensible. The only difference between your ordinary hired gun and me is that I’m beyond all that hypocrisy.”

“That’s something uncommon. What are you after, if it isn’t money?”

“Power, and the access to New Pegasus.”

“You know that in this city, first you get the money, then you get the power.”

“And then you get the mares.” I smiled. “I know that philosophy, Metronome. However, as I said, my top priority is to get into New Pegasus.”

“If that is the case, I’m afraid we can’t help you with that.”

A sting of disappointment made me frown. Although it was rather obvious that the Freedom Field gangs had no way of getting anypony into New Pegasus, I had that tiny bit of hope about it.

“What?” I asked, unhappy.

“That’s how it works, Farsight. In order to get yourself into New Pegasus, you need somepony from the inside to vouch for you. They only want ponies that are worth their interest. Also, there is a citizenship fee, depending on who vouches for you. If some important pony is the one welcoming you in, like, let’s say one of the Ferraturas, or somepony in the City Board, the fee you’ll have to pay will be minimal. However, if a street-level trader is the one vouching for you, you’ll have to find a true shitload of caps to obtain your Citizenship Card. As you see, it’s a rather well thought system to keep the riffraff out. Not that we complain, however. After all, Freedom Field is full of New Pegasus rejects that don’t know where to go, and those rejects are the ones filling our pockets.”

“This one is a world of traders and pencil pushers, indeed.”

“I couldn’t have said it better. Now that your motives are clear and that you see that we can’t do anything for you, I assume you’ll be leaving us.”

“No, not really.”

“No? How so?” Metronome seemed surprised.

“The NER sent me to destabilize Freedom Field. They want the city, but they don’t want to fight. It’s a stalemate that bothers them a bit too much.”

“So you’re still working for the NER. I had understand you were going to betray them.”

“So to speak, although I don’t think I’m betraying them. I never pledged allegiance to the twin unicorns, after all. What counts is that I’m here on a mission from the Republic, but the Republic won’t recognize my existence. Also, if I don’t bring back any result in a month, they’ll dump me. As you see, I’m close to losing everything. That’s why I don’t worry all that much about being secretive and all that. Besides, I have the feeling that this alliance keeps being a scam to keep the NER at bay.”

“A scam?”

“I have my sources that tell me that Saddle Buckmare is very active and happy in the last times. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I don’t see that you are happy at all. And that sounds like trouble in paradise to me.”

“No wonder why you’re called Farsight.”

“Exactly. And also, may I remind you that you owe me something?”

“What do we owe you?”

“The plan you used to close the alliance with the Buckmares and the Followers was mine. I was the one that scouted the Coilites for a possible negotiation. And the plan to limit the drug supply came out of my mind as well. To sum up, I’d say you owe me something.”

“Come back tonight for your payment.” Metronome smiled seductively.

“It sounds good, but I have another offer to do. One that would need your cooperation.”

“Our cooperation? I’m listening.”

“As you know, I’ve been sent by the NER to break the stalemate. However, the way I see it, breaking the stalemate equals helping one of the factions. Since you have my sympathies, even after having tried to kill me...” I winked at Metronome “... I’ve decided to offer my help to you.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why do we still have your sympathies?”

“Honestly, because if I had to choose who’s to govern the city I live in from the existing lot, that would definitely be you. Buckmare is a maniac, Ampera just doesn’t give a single damn about anything and Goldie is a manipulative bitch. You seem to maintain a concept of honor among thieves and righteousness. That’s why I like you.”

“Heh. I would have never expected those principles from a buck like you, Farsight.”

“Blame my Stable education. I still have residual concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ lurking in the dark corners of my mind.” I smiled slothfully. “What do you think about my plan?”

“You’re implying that we’d have to ally with the NER!”

“Should that be a problem?” I shrugged. “As far as I know, you were willing to sign a treaty with the Republic. And, to be honest, I think the NER would love to be able to position itself on the side of one of the factions.”

“Yes, but now we can’t, as much as we’d like to. The population has assumed the ideal of peaceful resistance. Goldie is a great manipulator. And now, going solo and offering an assimilation proposal to the NER would have Miss Cleff hung and quartered. Figuratively speaking, of course.”

“I see... So you’re tied in politics.”

“Exactly. Miss Cleff can’t make a single move without risking her political status. I think that’s what makes Saddle so happy. She’s bleeding out in her own trap.”

“That is a tough situation. Listen, I can get you out of it, but only in the way I told you. I can give you the keys to an alliance with the NER. You only have to take them.”

“I’m sorry, Farsight, but as much as we appreciate your help, we must refuse. The Buckmares and the Followers know you already, and Miss Cleff can’t afford having you acting on my behalf. They’ll see foul play in each of your actions, and if I know Goldie half as good as I think I do, she’ll use you as a weapon to turn the population against Miss Cleff, and she can’t afford that.”

“What are you going to do next?”

“Frankly, I have no idea. Maybe you can pull some strings on your own.”

Metronome started walking towards the room door, which had been partially open since I entered. Anypony could have been watching us, but I simply didn’t care about that. She was about to leave when she stopped and looked at me.

“Now, get moving. I’ve got work to do.”

“Of course, Metronome.” I trotted close to her.

“Also, you could dress something fancier while you’re in town. That armor makes you look like a raider.”

“Oh, yes. Speaking of which, Rose and I would need somewhere to sleep in town.”

“Take your former rooms, they’re still vacant.”

“Thank you very much, Metronome.”

“You’re welcome. Now, get out of my room before my patience runs out.”

I trotted out while Metronome closed the door and locked it shut with a small key she hid in her purse. I walked down the corridors until I found the room where I had spent days recovering from the attacks I had suffered from some Buckmare goons. The door wasn’t locked, so I walked in and closed it behind me. The armor fell to the ground with a thudding noise, and I got into the shower. The feeling of the pouring water on my fur had an almost healing effect.

Feeling clean and refreshed, I unpacked the suit, the shirt and the tie from the saddlebags, and dressed in style. It felt good to be out of the tough, constraining armor for a while. I brushed my mane carefully, trying to look as good as possible, even for a ragged, battered Wastelander. With a lot of questions in my head, I left the Music School.

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I found myself looking at the building right in front of the Music School while the rest of the world kept moving. I realized that, for the first time ever since I left the Stable, I found myself not knowing what to do next. Until that moment, I had always had a task to do, either due to circumstances or because I had planned to do that. Suddenly, things had changed and I was standing there, wondering about what my next move would be.

After having realized that the Stringers were caught in their own political trap, I knew I would have to find another way to alter the status quo. What in other words meant moving Saddle Buckmare to one side or another. After all, the chief of the Diamonds was the key to Freedom Field. The situation at the moment had him locked in an uneasy partnership with Goldie, and that lockdown was what caused the stalemate. If Saddle changed his position, either to a more hostile one or to a more NER-welcoming one, Goldie’s non-violent solution would be proven pointless.

However, there was no way I was going to be able to convince Saddle. Mostly, because I wouldn’t be able to get near him without getting beaten to a bloody pulp. I couldn’t ask Stuka to speak on my behalf, since that would reveal our mutual agreement to Buckmare, making her status inside the Buckmare gang compromised. My best bet was Ampera Von Ohm, since she seemed rather inclined to sign a treaty with the NER, and she probably wouldn’t have all the political issues that the Stringers had.

The approach I would have to take in order to convince Ampera to help me topple Saddle and Goldie’s union was totally unknown to me. I simply had no idea of what made Ampera tick, whether it was power, money or privileges. Being so secretive, the Coilites were a great mystery regarding their goals and interests. They looked like standard gun runners specialized in energy weapons, but something was off with them. Their lack of involvement in the issues of Freedom Field, their indolence when it came to decide about their future... That didn’t sound like the usual trader behavior.

I reached the Tesla Bar while my mind kept trying to shed some light on my next steps. The guard on the entrance door recognized me and welcomed me in with a short nod. It seemed that my alignment with the Stringers had earned me some enemies, but it had earned me some respect as well.

“Good day, sir. Are you carrying any concealed weapons?”

“Concealed? No. I only carry my rifle, and it’s on plain sight.” True, I wore it hanging from my back.

“I can see that. Mind letting me check?”

“Go ahead.”

The guard conducted a quick frisk and stepped back. He smiled and nodded.

“Good to go, sir.”

“Thank you very much.”

I opened the door and walked into the ugly, gray, metal plated bar. I had expected to see Ampera behind the counter, but she wasn't there. Instead, I saw the hulking blackness of LaRoche looking at me from the far end of the room. I waved a hoof to salute him and he smiled in return.

“Hi, LaRoche.”

“*Bonjour*, Farsight. What do you want?”

“I'd like to speak to Ampera. Where is she?”

“She's in the workshop. I'll go ask her if she wants to meet you. Please, wait here. And don't touch anything.”

“Fine.”

LaRoche opened a service door behind the counter and left the room at a rather fast pace. Obviously, he didn't like to leave the place unattended. I used that time to think about my approach. I'd have to tempt her with the possibility of taking over Saddle's business. While I was picturing the situation LaRoche returned to the room.

“She's agreed to speak with you. Follow me.”

“Thanks.” I smiled and nodded.

LaRoche turned around and left the room through the service door and I followed him. We went down a staircase and walked through a narrow and dark corridor. If I was not mistaken, we had to be below ground level. After a couple of minutes walking, we climbed another group of stairs and exited the corridor.

The workshop was a big room, thoroughly lit by a myriad of neon tubes. Tools and equipment hung from the walls, and a series of workbenches were displayed alongside one of the sides of the room. In the middle of the room, Ampera was looking at a pony-shaped mannequin wearing an ornate plate armor while adjusting nuts and bolts with a wrench. Instead of the sharp dresses that she used to wear, she had a dirty red jumpsuit on, as well as an oil-stained apron and a welder mask. Her shiny white mane fell to one of the sides of her back, causing a shocking contrast with the red suit.

“*Mademoiselle* Ampera, he's here.”

“Thank you, LaRoche. Leave us alone.” Ampera didn't even turn around to give orders to her bodyguard.

LaRoche nodded and left the room hastily, closing the door behind him. When the hoofsteps faded away, Ampera turned around and made me a sign to get closer. I walked to the middle of the room and looked at her. She kept focused on the armor, though.

“What's wrong with this armor, Farsight?” she asked, out of the blue.

What kind of question was that? I looked at the mannequin thoroughly, checking out every single plate of the heavy armor. The black steel plates shone menacingly, and the flowy electric blue decorations gave the equipment a futuristic look. If there was anything wrong, I couldn't see it.

“I don't see anything wrong...”

“That's because there's nothing wrong to see.” Ampera snickered. “Just try it on, and you'll notice how wrong this armor is.”

“Too heavy?”

“Too heavy indeed. That's why this prototype was never fabricated en masse. The T-66 Commander Armor was too heavy to maneuver, even with the proper spell matrix working.”

“Spell matrix? That sounds like...”

“Rangers? Steel Rangers? Of course, Farsight. That's where this comes from.”

“How did you get it?”

“I didn’t get it. I built it.”

“You what?”

“I built it. I crafted every single plate, I joined them together and I cast the spell matrix myself.”

“And how did you know how to do that?”

“I had the blueprints. From there on, it’s not that hard.”

“Where did you get the blueprints? Did you buy them or something?”

“Buy them? The Rangers don’t sell their blueprints. Technology is sacred to them. They won’t go bargaining with it.”

“Then, how?” I felt puzzled.

“You don’t seem to get it, do you?”

Ampera walked away from the T-66 Armor and headed for one of the walls. Using her magic, she removed one of the tool panels. Behind it, there was a safe stuck into the wall. She operated the safe knob and opened the door. She picked up a little trinket from the safe and closed the door. Then, she returned to the center of the room and showed me the small object she had picked up. It was a small crest with a symbol on it, an emblem showing a big apple crossed by a winged sword, with three cogs with stars on them. It was the emblem of the Steel Rangers.

“Does this mean that you...?”

“Former Scribe Ampera Von Ohm, of the Steel Rangers, Neighvada Contingent.”

“Former Scribe? Were you cast out?”

“Yes. The Elders and I had different points of view.”

“What do you mean, ‘different points of view’?”

“Well, the Steel Rangers are a bunch of tech hoarders. They search the Wasteland, looking for pre-War technology in functional state, and they store it. Just like that. They grab it, document it, and store it so that no pony else can use it. I thought that I could profit of that technology and started selling small appliances to the caravans. Soon, they caught me and cast me out of the Order.”

“That’s how you got the schematics.”

“Indeed, but they’re worthless. This armor will need a total overhaul to be functional. But I don’t think you came to speak about armors and spell matrixes with me.”

“Indeed, I came with a proposal.”

Ampera smiled wryly while she took the apron off and hung it from a small hook close to the entrance door. Then, she walked up and down the workshop with an air of superiority, smiling smugly and looking at me with an amused expression.

“Let me guess. You went to Dee and she told you she can’t do anything about Saddle and Goldie, isn’t it?”

Ouch. She had anticipated my move, taking the initiative in this conversation from me. The more I spoke with Ampera, the more I realized how smart she was. And being so smart, she preferred to keep to herself and act discreetly, while others fought for the spotlight. Very Steel Ranger-like.

“Yes.”

“And now you come to me looking for a helping hoof, thinking you’ll have some brilliant idea to offer me.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, I’m listening.”

Ampera sat on her flanks and smiled watching me struggle to come out with a good way of putting things together. My throat had become dry and I had the feeling of being walking on the high wire. All my confidence, all my speech abilities, all my strong points were nullified by Ampera's presence and wits. I felt helpless at the moment, faced with the task of having to battle a superior intellect.

"We-well..." I stuttered. "Dee is weak. Her ties and her principles make her vulnerable. She clings to power, afraid of losing the people's favor. You, on the other hand, don't seem to worry about what the population thinks of you. I could help you climb to the top. I have ties to the NER, and they could catapult you into the leading spot of Freedom Field. You'd only have to agree on an assimilation. Doesn't it sound good to you?"

"You don't know me at all, Farsight. I don't want power. Power brings strings attached, your friends over at the Music School should know that very well, and you should too, since you're so willing to help them. If you ask me, Dee can keep the power for herself. That's why I support her."

"You know that, if things keep like this, Dee will end up losing her power to Saddle and Goldie."

"I know that Saddle is a menace for the welfare of this town. I know that Goldie is a bitch that has used her 'oh-we're-so-good-and-we-care-about-everypony-equal' position to become a bit of a living saint around here. Now she's profiting of her popular favor to appear as the logical alternative to the distant and grandiloquent Dee Cleff. I am aware that, if things carry on like this, we're going to have a war in our hooves."

"And you want that?"

"Of course not."

"Then why don't you act?"

"What would you consider 'acting'? Running to the NER crying for help because the bad, bad Buckmares are becoming too powerful?"

"You know the NER could provide security and great benefits, don't you?"

"That's what they say. They'll bring more things with them, of that I'm sure. That's why I prefer leaving things as they are right now."

"But..."

"What I said is final. Right now, I don't feel like helping you change things, since there are no things that require being changed. I like Freedom Field as it is, with its struggles and its politics. It's a fun show to watch, if you don't get too involved."

"But... but..."

"No more buts, Farsight. Now, please, leave. I need to work on this."

Ampera turned around and faced the armor once again. There was nothing else to be done here. I had tried my best, and I had failed. All my wits had proven useless against Ampera's mental abilities. I walked out of the room and through the dark corridor, feeling down and weak. I thought I could outsmart anypony in the world, and I had just been outsmarted myself. Ampera's logic was ravaging. If something works, why change it?

#

Note: Perks obtained.

Easy Lover: You have mastered the arts of seduction. You get +1 Perception and +1 Charisma when interacting with somepony of the opposite sex.

Questionable Logic: You have been outsmarted, which has hit you pretty badly. -1 Intelligence.

## **Chapter 8: Radio Nowhere**

*Hello there and good morning to all our audience out there! I'm your host, Mister New Pegasus, and this is New Pegasus Radio, filling your day with the best music in the Wasteland and bringing you the latest news out there. I hope you enjoyed this last one as much as I did. You know, this Velvet Remedy is one hell of a singer. I have a soft spot for classical recordings, as you will probably know if you listen regularly to this station, but I must admit this mare's voice is almost as good as Sweetie Belle's.*

*Let's start with the news, shall we? The Freedom Field Shuffle has turned out to be a magnificent bluff. What seemed like the start of a spiral of violence and chaos has ended up being nothing at all, since the gang leaders of Freedom Field have decided not to fight the New Equestrian Republic. Instead, they have decided to go down the path of non-violence, resisting peacefully to the gambit of the Republic. This humble reporter isn't used to situations like these, so please bear with me as I try to make the situation at hoof as clear as possible to you.*

*What everypony in New Pegasus feared was a full-scale declaration of war coming from the gangs, which would have brought all the military might of the Republican Army right to our gates. By adopting this solution, the gangs have gallantly passed the responsibility and the initiative of the conflict to the leaders of the Republic. However, they have imposed a serious constraint to the NER. An attack by the armies of the two unicorns would be considered an invasion, which, according to political analysts consulted by this reporter, would cause a massive unrest in the neighboring town. As you see, it is a convoluted situation.*

*On to the issue that is shaking the City of New Pegasus day after day, the infamous Ferratura murder case. The New Pegasus Police Department isn't being able to do any progress, or so it seems from the lack of news we've had in the last days. The tension between the Ferratura family and the Full House Group is raising to worrisome levels lately. Last night a croupier of the Platinum Horseshoe was attacked ruthlessly by a group of unknown ponies, but rumor has it they were affiliated to the Ferraturas. The Security Branch of the City Board is seriously concerned about the increase in the attacks, since the NPPD is already overwhelmed by the murder case. This humble reporter is worried as well.*

*And now, on to the news of the great Neighvada! The news is... that there is no news! Everything has gone quiet and peaceful in the last few days. The caravans move up and down the Territory without any trouble, bringing supplies to each and every homestead in the Wasteland. At the same time, the NER hasn't moved lately from its base in the Neighvada end of Divide Pass, down Route 15. However, there are rumours of activity in the town of Nobuck. Some say it's the NER, some say it's the Steel Rangers, some say it's a pack of Raiders. The only thing sure is that no two ponies say the same thing.*

*Well, that was all the news for now, everypony! Let's return to some music to make the day brighter! How about we jump on the dance floor with some of the best beats by Vinyl Scratch and the magistral cello of Octavia? What? You never heard them playing together? I have, and I'm going to play it back to you ponies out there. Remember, this is New Pegasus Radio, and I'm your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...*

I was bruised and battered.

I couldn't tell what I felt.

I was unrecognizable to myself.

I had been outsmarted. I had been played around by a mind more prepared and experienced than mine. And if that weren't enough, I was descending into despair. My only chances to fulfil my task and obtain a tiny bit of security were tied to obtaining the support from one or some of the gangs, but without any support at all, my future looked very, very grim.

If the Republic left us on our own, what would we do? What would I do? How would I live? Would I have to leave Freedom Field and start a life on the Wasteland? What would happen to Rose? How would Nadyr take

my failure? All those questions tortured me, and I was on the verge of crying. Crying out of pure rage, crying out of frustration, but most of all, crying out of fear. The same fear that had grasped me when I was cast out of the Stable, that dark cloud that didn't let you see or think properly, and that sipped the energy out of you.

I realized how little I had really achieved since I had left the Stable. All my life had been a big gamble, one move after another, moving the chips with ability, swift thinking and a pinch of luck. However, Lady Luck tends to be a fickle bitch, and it had left me on my own in the worst moment. I simply couldn't see a way out of my situation. Alone as I was, I couldn't figure out a way of recovering momentum and advancing in my plans.

Almost staggering due to stress, I found myself close to Trader Plaza. I just had no idea about how I had ended up there, since I wasn't really paying attention to where my hoofsteps led me. At the moment, however, I was looking at the myriad of stands and shacks, while the cacophony of voices of the vendors and buyers clogged my ears. I decided to go check on Rose. I needed somepony to talk with.

The market was bubbling with activity, as a group of caravans had made it to Freedom Field, carrying a large amount of supplies of the most various kinds. Food from beyond the Divide, raw materials as metal or gemstones, clothes or electronic appliances. The crammed stands attracted both the local vendors and the bystanders. I felt curious as well and headed over to take a peek, but somepony stood in my way.

"Farsight!" she called. It was Sunberry Grass, and she looked excited about something.

I tried to hide my stress and depression by composing a calm smile, and I swear to Celestia that this was one of the hardest roles I had been forced to play in my life.

"Oh, Sunberry, hi. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"What's all the fuss about?"

"Oh, it's the caravan trail that arrived from the NER earlier today. As the caravaneers say, Divide Pass is now safe for trade."

"That's good news." I faked a smile, but in the inside, this fact shone like a sun to me. If the NER started pumping supplies into Freedom Field, this could shift the opinion of the local population.

"No doubt... However, this wasn't what I wanted to show you."

"Show me?"

"It's your little filly."

"What's wrong with Rose?" I was starting to fear something wrong had happened to her.

"Wrong? There's nothing wrong! In fact, she's doing fine, too fine."

"Too fine?"

"She's sold out three times today. I don't know if it's her adorable look or her ability finding goods, but she is getting her pockets full!"

"Really? Why don't you get me to her?"

"Sure thing!"

Sunberry trotted down the alley of stands, making me follow her. As we got close to my old stand, I could hear the voices and see the crowd waiting in line to buy something in Rose's stand. A small fire sparked in the darkness of my soul. It was pride, but not the selfish pride that costed me my banishment from the Stable. Instead, it was the pride of a father, so to speak. The pride of seeing someone beloved succeed in her goals.

Rose was moving busily from one end of the stand to the other, her blue beret shaking graciously with every little jump or dash she took to pay attention to each of her customers. Indeed, she looked adorable, and she did have a natural charm when it came to selling things. I had to fight to keep the tears inside, since the rush of pride was making me feel miserable.

“Yes, of course, sir...” Rose smiled at an elderly stallion that was taking interest in a dusty hat. “It’s thirty caps, but honestly, I think it’s a real bargain... Oh, Farsight! Hi!”

Rose noticed me and waved in salute. I nodded with the hardest smile in my face. I was feeling so proud for my protégé, seeing how she had managed to obtain great results all by herself. On the other hand, I felt miserable. I had failed to achieve anything, and I had put all I had on the table. I had bitten more than what I could actually chew.

“Hello, Rose...” I smiled, forced by the situation.

“Hello, Farsight. Excuse me, everypony. I’m taking a small break. Come back in ten minutes, please.”

The crowd disbanded with a grumbling noise, while Rose packed the contents of the stand into a big bag. Once we were on our own, she hugged me with a smile. I had to bite my lower lip to refrain from crying. This was starting to be a bit of a torture.

“Farsight! You should see this! I’m making a lot of money!” she squeed.

“I... see...” I stuttered. “You’ve got a talent.”

“Really?”

“Of course, Rose... Of course. I did sell some stuff, but I didn’t have a line of ponies waiting. You’re really good at this, you know?”

“I am? Thank you, Farsight, thank you so much!”

“Y-you’re welcome, Rose.” Tears were starting to slide down my cheeks. I couldn’t help it anymore.

“Farsight... are you crying?” Rose looked at me with a worried face.

“Y-yes... but it’s just because I-I’m so proud of you...” I stuttered. “Now get back to business... it’s not good to have the customers waiting.”

“All right...” Rose started unpacking the wares with a worried face, while I hugged her once again and left the place, trying to keep the tears inside.

She had found success in trading. She was thriving, while I was deeply buried in my own schemes. She was happy, while I was stressed. She could work her way forward, while I was stuck in a stalemate. I was feeling a strange mix of emotions at the moment. On the one side, Rose’s success was a source of pride and joy, and overall, it was a ray of hope. If things ended up going wrong, there might be another way out. On the other side, however, Rose’s success made clear my failure. Seeing her thrive made me realize how wrong my situation was, and how little chances I had of succeeding.

Looking at it with a little bit of distance and perspective, I should have felt relieved. I should have let the pride I felt for Rose fill my spirits and cheer me up and make me fight for what I wanted. However, I didn’t do that. I just basked in my own disgrace. I saw Rose as a clear demonstration of my pathetic intent of climbing the ladder. My misery grew like a dark well that was swallowing me little by little.

I needed somepony’s shoulder to cry on, somepony to comfort me. Or, more properly, some griffin to listen to me and make me feel cared about. I needed Stuka.

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I had walked all the way to Stuka’s place and had sat before her door, waiting for her to come back. My morale was hitting rock bottom at the moment. I could see no positive outcomes to my mission, since the ones that had the power to change things wouldn’t do it, either because they couldn’t or because they didn’t want to. All my plans had become useless at the moment, and the shiny lights of New Pegasus were unreachable, even if they were so close.

“Farsight?” I heard her call. “What is wrong?”

“Stuka...” I got up, tears about to surface.

“Oh, my. What happened, dear?”

“I... I need to talk to you...”

“OK, come in.” Stuka opened the door and led me into her apartment. “What happened?”

“It’s that...”

“Is something wrong with Rose?”

“No... I just...” I was shivering.

“Come here. You’re about to break down.”

Stuka embraced me with her wings, pulling me close to her chest. At the feel of her body warmth, I couldn’t bear it anymore and started crying in silence. We stood like that for minutes, with my tears wetting her fur and her wings keeping me close to her body. I could hear her sing quietly, her usually rough voice turned into a soft, gentle tune that soothed my broken spirits. I sobbed and looked up to her face.

“What are you singing?”

“It’s a lullaby my mother used to sing to me when I was very young. I find it to be almost healing. Are you feeling better now?”

“Yes, thank you, sweetheart.”

I kissed her gently on her beak and broke free from her embrace. Then I walked to one of the windows, and I watched the endless desert horizon that stretched to the East of Freedom Field. Stuka got close to me, caressing me gently with one of her wings.

“Do you want to talk about whatever worries you?”

“I shouldn’t...”

“Yes you should.” Stuka’s voice became stern and motherly. “If you don’t get it out of your mind, it will end up making you miserable.”

“But it’s dangerous for you...”

“Farsight, you can’t expect to protect everypony you care about by being a shield. Tell me what worries you, and I’ll handle the risks that involve me.”

“All right...” I sobbed and sniffed. “I am working for the Republic right now. Not officially, but I’m running their little errands. They want me to drive Freedom Field out of this non-violent stance. It makes them uncomfortable.”

“So that was your super secret plan.”

“Yes, I’m sorry for having kept it a secret.”

“You did what you thought was best for me. I can’t blame you for that, honey.”

“Thanks, Stuka. I still feel bad about it.”

“Want to snuggle a bit?” She snickered and winked. “It will make you feel better.”

“I’m not in the mood, dear. Let’s just talk a bit, OK?”

“Fine, as you wish. Oh, are you hungry?”

“Why do you ask?”

“If you want to talk, why don’t we do it at the table?”

I gave it a thought, and my body replied quickly with a roaring stomach. I was starting to adopt the dangerous habit of skipping meals, and at the mention of food I remembered that I hadn’t shoved anything down my mouth in hours.

“Yes... That is a good idea.”

“I only have a box of Mac and Cheese, I hope you like them.”

“I’d eat anything now, Stuka. It’s not like I’m going to get picky.”

Stuka smiled and picked the box from a cupboard, a pot from a rack and put it all together on one of the fires in her kitchen. While the food was getting cooked, she fetched some plates and laid them on the table.

“So tell me. You had some devious plan to bring chaos to this town, didn’t you?”

“That’s not what I said. The Republic wanted me to break the non-violent position of the gang alliance. That doesn’t imply turning Freedom Field into hell.”

“All right, all right. Then what is the problem?”

“The problem is that I’ve only got one month to do it, and that I’m only one pony with no support who can’t convince anypony to join him in his plans! That’s the problem! If I don’t get things done quickly, my life will be over!”

“Over? Come on, darling. You’re overreacting.”

“I am not! I’ll be left on my own! Without a single income, without support, and having played around with the gangs a bit too much! I’ll be done for in seconds!”

Stuka chuckled while stirring the pot with the macaroni.

“Oh, dear. Aren’t you a bit of a drama queen, Farsight.”

“Do you think this is a joke, Stuka?” I almost roared. Stuka, however, didn’t seem to take it too harshly. Instead, she cooed lightly and smiled.

“No, I know you’re serious, dear. But I also think you’re a tad too nervous. Come on, you can think better than that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m no smarty pants, honey, but I know my basics. I love you because you’re cold and rational when it comes to everything except the ones you care for. And now, you’re not being cold and rational when you should be. Come on, tell me a bit more. You are stressed by a time frame, but I never thought that would break you so easily.”

“No... that wasn’t all.”

Stuka removed the pot from the fire and sniffed the food. Then, she winced and grumbled.

“Damn. I am a terrible cook. Oh, well, it will have to do. Then, what is all?”

“I played my cards... I pulled my strings with the Stringers. I thought they’d be more than willing to sign a treaty with the NER to obtain benefits and prove Goldie and Saddle wrong, but it turned out wrong. They are too afraid to move.”

“The Stringers afraid? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I am bloody serious, Stuka.”

“Fine, fine. Don’t get all fired up. Eat something, it will be good for you.”

I picked a bit of the gruel Stuka’s macaroni had turned into and chewed it. It felt like having a tire in your mouth, and it tasted off, but I ate it anyway. First, I was hungry. Second, I didn’t want to appear ungrateful to Stuka.

“It’s... good.”

“Cut the crap, Farsight. It’s junk, I know. Still, it’s food. Now tell me about the Stringers.”

“They are too afraid to move. Apparently, the population likes this situation.”

“Yes, it’s the usual talk in the streets. The traders are a bit nervous, but the rest of the population cheers the Goldie Plan, as they’ve called it.”

“The Goldie Plan?”

“Yes, the Goldie Plan. I think she has an ego so big it doesn’t fit in her body. The thing is that she’s been able to convince the ponies about the benefits of resistance. She’s getting more and more praise every day.”

“That’s what makes the Stringers afraid. They’re losing popular favour, but they won’t do anything about it. They fear that any move will be bad for them.”

“Somehow I think they’re right, Farsight.”

“That’s why I stopped looking for help there and headed to talk to the Coilites.”

“Ampera.”

“Yes, Ampera. I also had the feeling that she would be willing to join the NER.”

“She did endorse the idea of a treaty in the meeting. No luck there either?”

“Nope. It turns out that Ampera likes this situation too. She says that nothing needs to be changed, so she won’t do a single thing to alter the current balance. So you see, I’ve been left alone with no options.”

“Who says you have no options?”

“I do, Stuka. I’m one pony on my own. I can’t expect to change an entire city.”

“Really?” Stuka smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Your narrow-mindedness. You say you can’t change a city. Haven’t you heard about the Light Bringer?”

“Yes, I have read the book. What is your point?”

“My point, brickhead, is that she managed to change the world. The world, all by herself. She had friends, indeed, but you have too. You have a lovely filly that would go through the Divide for you, and you have me. Of course you can change a city.”

“But the gangs...”

“Screw the gangs, Farsight. You’re very smart, but now your mind is totally blocked by the constraints you’ve imposed yourself. The gangs won’t welcome your plans, so what? When you need to get things done, do them yourself. That was my first lesson as a mercenary, and it should be yours too.”

“Do things myself...”

“That’s right, dear. Yourself. Move. Look for weaknesses and exploit them. You want Ampera to support you? Good, then change the situation. You want Dee to support you? Fine, break the ties she has. You want Saddle to support you? Forget about it.”

I breathed deep and let Stuka’s words penetrate into my mind. The pieces started to fit once again, and a ray of light shone in the darkness. She was right. She was so, so right. I had fooled myself to think that I could be a puppeteer that had all the world on his hooves, but that wasn’t the truth. There was a time to play the puppeteer, and there was another time to get dirty. I had been pulling the strings until there were no more strings to be pulled, so I had to brace myself for some direct action.

“Thank you, Stuka. Where would I be without you?” I smiled.

“Who cares? You’re with me now, and that’s all that matters.”

I walked around the table to hug Stuka. She was shining a new light to my situation, and that lifted my spirits once again. There was hope. It was dim and frail, but there was hope. She cooed when I embraced her and kissed me gently on the cheek.

“Feeling better now, Farsight?”

“Yes, dear. Much better.” I exaggerated a bit, just to make Stuka feel better.

“Good. Now, why don’t we go out for a walk? I love Freedom Field at dusk.”

“Of course, Stuka.”

Quickly, Stuka and I cleared the table of plates and glasses and left the apartment. My mind was starting to work again. There had to be many ways of changing the current situation, and if a PipBuck technician with a wimpy body and lousy magic had been able to change the world (or so they said), I should be able to shift the power game of Freedom Field as well. I just needed to use my mind properly, and for Celestia’s sake, I was going to.

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Darkness was starting to take over the streets of Freedom Field as the light of the day was becoming dimmer minute after minute. The few shops that were lucky enough to have an undamaged showcase were beginning to light their lamps and neons, flooding the streets with streams of colored lights. Indeed, Freedom Field at dusk had magic in the air. Of course, there was also danger floating around. The activity of daytime, with traders and caravaneers showing their wares around town made way to a different pulse, the one of nightclubs and hookers.

“I love this time of the day.” Stuka walked pleasantly down the main street of Freedom Field. We were attracting the looks of all the ponies in town, but she didn’t seem to care about it.

“Really?”

“Yes, look around! The dim lighting, the shops making their last sales for the day, the clubs opening up, the neons banishing the darkness to the alleys... Isn’t it just magic?”

“Well, it is quite a show.” I smiled and shrugged.

“Oh, you!” Stuka wrapped me in one of her wings. “Are you still deep in your misery or what?”

“No... I’m just thinking about... things.”

“Now, tell me.”

“I’m thinking about Dee.”

“What about her?”

“I’m curious about why she’s losing popular favor. I mean, Freedom Field is thriving, independent of what Goldie did or whatnot. I can’t understand why she’s becoming more and more unpopular as the days go by.”

“Well, word in the streets is that she’s become too distant. She does care about the traders, but the ponyfolk in town thinks the Stringers don’t give a damn about them anymore.”

“And do you think that too?”

“I can’t tell, since my view of things is biased. I work for the competitors, remember?”

“Yes, yes, I know, but you have two eyes in your face, don’t you? You should have an opinion about it, regardless of who pays your salary.”

Stuka looked up to the sky, considering her possible answers. It was a compromised situation for her, but I needed to know what she had to say. I had no doubt that hers would be the most honest opinion I would get in the entire Freedom Field.

“Well, I do.”

“And?”

“I agree with the people. At close range, Dee is a magnificent, charismatic leader. She could convince a griffin not to use his wings. Therefore, she should be able to maintain her position as a public figure without trouble. However, the way I see it, she’s lost the initiative to Goldie. After all, the common populace is stupid, no offense meant.”

“Are you implying I’m part of the common populace?” I smirked ironically.

“No, no.” Stuka chuckled. “I meant that the common folk worships the one that walks by and appears to care about them. Dee obtained a great popular credit by achieving a reasonable and inclusive peace between the gangs, and has been living off the profits of that peace. Now, however, she’s running low on credit, and Goldie knows that. Therefore, she started becoming more and more of a public figure, gaining popular favor in the process. And lately, with the success of her non-violent resistance gambit, she’s really threatening to displace Dee from the top spot.”

“So you’re saying Dee should return to her public activity in order to undermine Goldie?”

“I’m not saying anything.” Stuka shrugged. “Hell, it’s only my opinion, darling. I might be totally wrong.”

“No, Stuka. Everything sounds reasonable. Everything you’ve said has logic embedded to it, and I like the way it sounds.”

I was starting to get all fired up. I felt the thrill of planning boost me once again, and I could see the light in my future once again. All I had to do was make the right moves, and I would be back on track in my quest for the Citizenship Card.

“Hey...” Stuka laughed. “Look at you! You’re actually smiling, Farsight. What’s on your crazy mind now?”

“Lots of things, honey. Lots of things.”

“No doubt about that. You’ve got that look once again. The very look you had when I first met you. You’re about to run into another scheme of yours, aren’t you?”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, go. Don’t let me keep you here, Farsight. Good luck.”

I smiled and kissed her passionately. I didn’t care about the locals watching us, since the only thing I wanted to do was to thank Stuka for what she had done for me this time. She had been my light in the darkness, my savior in misery. I owed him that. Our tongues entwined in an instant of passion and emotion that seemed to last forever, as she grabbed my body with her talons and lifted us both in the air while the kiss carried on. Once back on earth, I looked at her emerald eyes.

“Thanks for everything, Stuka. I’ll be back.”

I turned around and left for my room, darting all the way upstairs. I needed to get my plans moving, and those involved leaving Freedom Field for a short while. First of all, I needed Nadyr back on my side. Since I knew that Freedom Field was a safe place now, I could use the half-zebra’s help. The only thing I would have to do would be convincing him. And secondly, I saw a great opportunity in the radio station. If Stuka was right and the ponyfolk of Freedom Field was easily influenceable, bombarding them with conveniently manipulated gossip was a good course of action. Goldie could be a manipulative bitch, but two can play that game.

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The Wasteland glowed in the dim light of the night. The sandy, dry ground of Neighvada shone in a bluish tone, reflecting the streams of moonlight sipping through the everlasting, thick cloud cover. The shadows of whatever stood on the ground shivered because of the slight breeze that blew from the East, bringing the smell of dampness in the air. It had to come from the lake that Rose had mentioned some time ago.

I galloped relentlessly down the old road that traversed Neighvada from North to South like a black line in the middle of the golden desert. Time was of the essence, and the sooner I got to Nobuck, the more time I would have to carry my plans forward. Of course, first I would have to convince some key ponies, such as Nadyr and Harpsong, but there were serious options of getting it done.

*You want Dee to support you? Fine, break the ties she has.* Stuka’s words echoed in my mind as I trod the sandy roads. Dee had driven her position into a political zugzwang. The only thing she needed to support me was some room to recover part of the political favor she had lost, and I had a feeling I could provide that. Well, not me exactly, but I would have something to do with it.

*You want Ampera to support you? Good, then change the situation.* Changing the situation was something harder than giving Dee a bit of political room. However, I had an ace up my sleeve, an ace in the shape of a functional radio station. With a little help of the NER and some digging done by Rose and Stuka, we should have a working smear network on the air soon. I was looking forward to seeing Goldie's face when I started spreading lies and rumours.

I saw the sun rise to the East, between the horizon and the cloud cover, and I saw it go down to the West, hiding itself behind the mountains of the Divide. Nobuck was rather far away, but the roads were secure since the NER opened the caravan trail. Every now and then, I would cross my paths with some Republican patrol watching over the sides of the dusty route. Most of them were friendly and let me pass without stopping, but I had to talk my way out of a couple of them. The closer I got to Nobuck, the more frequently I found patrols.

The second day en route was beginning when I finally saw the hulking Gummy Building in the horizon. It had a bit of a homecoming feeling to me, even if I knew my place was far to the north, in the blinding lights of the city of New Pegasus. However, I knew that the key steps for my future would be given in the Republican base, so I sped up to cover the last stretch of the journey.

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The guards of the Gummy Building hadn't forgotten about me, as they saluted when I walked across the door in the lower back of the headquarters. Honestly, having to enter a building shaped like a giant toothless alligator through its ass had something utterly wrong in it. However, I had the feeling that Pinkie Pie had a couple of screws loose, if what I had read about her was accurate, which, looking at the giant gator building, didn't sound all that far fetched.

Harpsong welcomed me with a surprised face when I entered the main headquarters room. As always, the place was fully covered in maps depicting all of the Neighvada Territory, and from the looks of things, the areas surrounding it. Harpsong was sitting in her usual, awkward way, in a sort of couch that fitted her way of laying her flank down. Behind her, some troopers worked hectically in their terminals, filtering information and reporting to the troops in the field. Harpsong herself was studying a folder with the word 'CLASSIFIED' printed across the cover.

"Farsight, what a surprise." Harpsong dropped the folder on the table. "Done already?"

"No, not really. Things have become rather stale over there, and I think we need to make some moves to stir the situation."

"Moves like what? You know that military action is totally out of question here."

"Of course. I don't want soldiers around, I want press."

"Press?"

"Gossip press, more properly. I need somepony that can move around Freedom Field going unnoticed and pick up the gossip in the streets, to later twist it and turn it into a full scale tabloid."

"I see where you're going. You want to make the gangs mad at each other, but will you be able to do that?"

"That is why I'm asking for help. I'm no good storyteller. I'm a rather nice schemer, and a proud fancy talker, but inventing stories isn't my forte. I lack imagination. You won't happen to have somepony around that can work hoof-to-hoof with me in order to sow dissent between the gangs?"

"I might." Harpsong shrugged. "But I need something more than that to give in to your demands."

"Listen, Harpsong. I have two factions that would like to sign a treaty with the Republic if the situation changed. On the other side, I have two others that don't want to, and those two are the ones blocking me at the moment. I need them out of the way, and the best solution is to confront them."

"And you expect to do it through gossip?"

"Yes, because their union is a product of the relationship between their two leaders. If they start bickering at each other due to both professional and personal issues, their union will surely break. Besides, I have another

powerful mare interested in joining the buck in charge of one of the opposing factions.”

“I’m getting lost.”

“All right, I’ll summarize. The factions opposing the union to the NER are two, one led by a stallion and one by a mare. The two are lovers, and the mare controls the stallion. You follow me so far?”

“Yes.”

“Then, if we break this relationship, their union will fall. Also, one of the factions that want to sign a treaty with the NER is led by a mare that wants to control the faction led by the stallion.”

“What would leave the remaining faction as the only one opposing the union. I see. That is a good plan, Farsight. However, how do you plan to deliver that gossip?”

“There is a Relay Wave Radio Station over here.” I pointed at the map, to the place where Rose and I had found shelter the last time we travelled to Freedom Field.

“Are you sure? I thought all of them had been destroyed.”

“This is Neighvada, remember?”

“Of course. Is it functional?”

“As far as I know, I think it is.”

“Those are great news, Farsight. Really great news. Consider your demand for help answered. You’ll have my best comms officer at your disposal.”

“So glad to hear that, Harpsong. However, I need something more.”

“What do you need?”

“I need a treaty proposal for the gangs. I think it will be better if you go to them with something certain, rather than having them ask.”

“Indeed. And what do you suggest I propose?”

“Give them the status of autonomy they long for. Free City of Freedom Field. Have them pay a tax for your protection, and have them abide some of your laws, but leave them space to govern themselves from there on. I have the feeling that they’ll agree.”

“You’re asking for a lot of things, you know?”

“I know, Harpsong. But I also know you want to deal with the situation in Freedom Field without having to resort to violence, and this is my proposal. A proposal that will be listened and thoroughly considered. You have my guarantee for that.”

“Fine, fine. Just don’t go all solemn with me.” Harpsong grumbled. “Elaborate. Now.”

“Harpsong, why did the gangs adopt the solution of peaceful resistance?”

“Because they’re sly bastards?”

“That is true, but also, there is another reason. They like things as they are, and they see the NER as a threat to their status quo. That’s why they don’t fight or submit.”

“And what are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting we respect the status quo as much as possible, so that it doesn’t come to affect the everyday street pony.”

“I don’t think Freedom Field is a democracy, Farsight. From what you tell me, I believe the gangs are the ones that have absolute power.”

“They have, but that power shifts from one gang to another, depending on the population. So, in the end, it’s a kind of democracy.”

“Understood. Mind continuing?”

“Of course.” I cleared my throat and carried on. “The NER must offer an integration of the City of Freedom Field with the least possible changes in the everyday life of the new city. For that, I suggest that we leave things as they are, adapting the dark democracy of the gangs to what the NER has as a standard.”

“That would mean creating a Town Hall.”

“And holding elections for Mayor. Exactly.”

“Wouldn’t that be a change the population would notice?”

“Yes, but it’s a surface change. The gangs would understand that easily, leave it to me.”

“All right. Then, what else?”

“Nothing, really. As I told you, things are good as they are. However, you could throw in some candy to make the deal more interesting.”

“Which candy?”

“Freedom Field has no industry or agriculture. All its income comes from scavengers and trade caravans. As you know, caravaneers are the raiders’ number one target. I suggest you propose giving Freedom Field an autonomous trade market like the one it has, and you throw in the protection for the caravans across Neighvada.”

“You mean, foalsitting them?”

“More or less. Set up some patrols across the roads, and have the caravans use the patrols as security relays. Ensure a safe route from Divide Pass to New Pegasus, and the citizens of Freedom Field will welcome you. After all, you will be guaranteeing their money.”

“I see. Everypony loves money.”

“Indeed. From there on, guarantee their freedom as is, with no kind of NER influence inside the walls of Freedom Field. I know that it’s a tough deal for you, but with that written down on paper, I’m very sure they’ll accept.”

Harpsong meditated her answer for a while, scrubbing her muzzle with one of her forehooves.

“Fine, you always seem to convince me. I’ll have my comms officer bring the treaty proposal to you, so that you can deliver it. Now, go and do whatever you have to do in that radio station of yours.”

I nodded and saluted, then I turned around and left the room. I didn’t expect Harpsong to agree with me on every single thing I proposed, but surprisingly enough, I had obtained a total victory. I had a comms officer assigned to my plan of sowing dissent and discord in the city of Freedom Field, and that was a very good thing to start off with.

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Nadyr was having lunch at the canteen, and my stomach reminded me that I hadn’t eaten for a long time, so I decided to buy myself some meatballs and join my striped companion before starting to discuss business matters, both with him and with Harpsong. I hadn’t seen him in a while, so I couldn’t hide my smile when I saw him chug a whole plate of oatmeal and sigh out of pleasure.

“Damn this tastes good!” he said. “Oh, Farsight! Good to see you again.”

“Same thing, Nadyr.” I shoved a meatball down my throat. It had been overcooked and tasted a little bit off, but it was food nonetheless. “How have you been doing?”

“Honestly? Patrolling the desert makes you wish for a balefire winter.”

“That’s all you’ve been doing? Patrolling?”

“Naww. We helped to set up a camp on the other side of the river. Manefield, I believe it was called. How about you?”

“Well, I returned to Freedom Field, and here I am, back again. I’m some sort of a courier.”

“Farsight the Courier. It sounds funny indeed. Oh, there was one thing I wanted to tell you about.”

“What is it? Some amazing discovery?”

“More of a scavenger’s paradise. Give me a minute to put you in context, though. I grew close to a city called Neighorleans. Ma decided to raise me in a zebra township close to Ponychartrain Swamp, since it was the only place where we were accepted.”

“I see.” I nodded. “You never told me about your life, actually.”

“I assume that you’re not interested.” Nadyr scowled.

“Why not?” I smiled at the amazed half-zebra. “After all, there’s no harm on getting to know each other.” I was honest. Even if I didn’t care too much about others, Nadyr and I were partners, so I believed our relationship should be of mutual trust. Who knows, maybe this could be the beginning of a great friendship.

“Wow, I didn’t expect this...” Nadyr seemed touched. “You’re the first pony to ever take interest on my life. Thanks...”

“Oh, come on. Tell me. You say you grew up close to Neighorleans.”

“Yes, I did. Ma started working as a baker in Peekayune, the zebra town I grew in. I made my living as a hunter in the swamp. That’s where I learned to be stealthy. Rad-snakes can spot noise from hundreds of meters away, and you damn sure don’t want to mess with them.”

“I understand. What happened then?”

“Ma died young, the poor soul, may Celestia guard her.” Nadyr looked at the cloudy sky and whispered a prayer. Peekayune had nothing tying me to it, so I left. I wandered the Wasteland for years, growing up and earning money as a hired gun. My stripes turned me into a pariah to the normal pony society, but I was very appreciated in the underground. I learned to lose my principles, working for anypony who paid well, no matter if they were slavers, raiders, mercenaries or peacemakers.”

“I won’t judge you, Nadyr. We all do what we need to do.”

“Thanks, Farsight. Well, as I was telling, I worked as an assassin in the other side of the Divide until the NER grew strong. Then, I decided to get away from them, as they started hunting down all the mercs. I crossed Divide Pass and established myself in Neighvada, working as a mercenary. After all, that’s all I know. Then, Dee Cleff hired me, and I met you when we killed those couriers. From there on, well.”

“Yes, I know you from there on.” I nodded and smiled. I patted Nadyr’s back, showing my appreciation. “But now that I know about you, why don’t you tell me about how you found out about Neighorleans?”

“It happened when I was a young colt. I was scouting the swamp, looking for prey, when I ended up in the middle of a big circle of trees. The place was a large open space, covered by a lush green dome of leaves. In the middle, I saw what looked like the remains of a town. It was lit by an eerie greenish light, as if fires were burning in the streets. However, it was too far to reach.”

“Couldn’t you swim?” I asked. “Living in the swamps...”

“It’s not the water, Farsight. There are things that could eat you in seconds living in the swamps.”

“Oh... How nasty.”

“Exactly. Nasty is the word. Well, later, when I returned to Peekayune I asked the town elders about the place. They told me that I had seen the lost city of Neighorleans, and that I should never speak of it again, since the place was cursed.”

“Cursed? Seriously?”

“Seriously. They believed it was cursed. Said that the town went silent months before the megaspells fell. At that time, I believed them, but with the years I assumed it wasn’t cursed. It was just the fear towards the unknown. Since then, I always kept the picture of the city in my mind.”

“Dangerous fauna and a mysterious curse. Indeed, that sounds like a dangerous setting. What makes you think the city hasn’t been searched before, anyway?”

“First reason, because it’s probably the hardest place to get to in the whole Wasteland, if you leave Canterlot aside. The place is so surrounded by water and trees that it’s just inaccessible.”

“All right. What do you mean when you say it’s inaccessible?”

“I mean that there’s no damn way of getting there... normally. The city was built in an island on the lake Ponychartrain. Although, calling it a lake is a bit far fetched, since it’s a damn swamp. Before the War, it was connected to the mainland via a bridge, but when the megaspells hit, the bridge was destroyed and the waters rose, leaving almost all of Neighorleans underwater.”

“Then, a boat should be enough to reach the city... the unsunken part of it, I mean.”

“Wrong answer. The problem is that the radiation messed up with the place. Instead of killing everything, it sparked growth. Now the rad-trees have formed a wall around the city. There’s no way a boat could make it through.”

“And by air? Pegasi, maybe?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Nadyr gave me a funny look. “I said trees, buck. Trees. With big branches and leaves. That’s a damn green dome. You can’t get through. Light almost doesn’t get through.”

“Understood. Anyway, I don’t think water and trees would stop many scavengers. They would eventually find a way in.”

“First of all, Farsight, the problem ain’t the water or the trees. It’s the things living in the water and the trees what mean business.”

“Like what?”

“Put your hoof in the water for ten seconds, and you’ll lose your leg. I’ve seen that happening.”

“Yes, well. Let’s assume you’ve found a way in avoiding the water and the trees. What can stop you in there?”

“That I can’t tell.” Nadyr shrugged. “There are tales about dark forces living in the city, spirits of the past. The only thing I know is that many went to Neighorleans and none returned. Still, the swamp city is a scavenger magnet. I’ve met many ponies that wanted to cross the tree dome and look for loot. To sum up, I’d say the city is a target, but it’s a risky move. Hard to get there, lots of threats in the city, big treasure in the end.”

“Sounds like you’re right. However, you said it was inaccessible. What made you change your mind?”

“Well, when I was patrolling the place for the NER I stumbled upon an old bunker. The place hadn’t been uncovered yet, so I decided to look for loot. The bunker happened to be a teleport booth.”

“Wow. I didn’t know there were any of those working.”

“This was, damn sure it was. I took a look at the destination coordinates, and well, what do you know? It happened to be a place I already knew. The very center of Neighorleans!”

“Interesting. Did you get the coordinates of the bunker?”

“Don’t worry. I won’t forget where I left our path to wealth.” Nadyr smiled broadly.

“So, I’m going to say your proposal is to go look for loot?”

“Exactly!” He couldn’t hold back his smile.

I smiled as well. The plan looked very, very promising. If all that Nadyr had told me was true, we could gather quite a lot of money in a very short time. Just from the pre-war bottles we would find, we would make a fortune. Still, there were other matters to care about.

“That sounds very good, Nadyr. We should give it a shot when circumstances allow it.”

“Why not now?”

“That’s because I haven’t solved our little issue in Freedom Field. Speaking of which, I would like you to come with me and help me out with some stuff.”

Nadyr scowled, the smile gone from his face. He was all hyped up with going on a treasure hunt, but being rich in the Wasteland was a death sentence. Being rich in New Pegasus, however, was something totally different. That would require a bit more of sacrifice. When I explained that minor detail to him, he seemed to cheer up a little. Foal steps, but I was gaining Nadyr’s appreciation.

“Well, tell me all about that issue.”

“You know Dee, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, Dee is in dire need of help. She needs to become popular once again. Either that, or Goldie will become the de facto leader of Freedom Field?”

“Don’t play around with me, Farsight. Really? Goldie? How can she actually move Dee off the spotlight?”

“By being in the right place at the right time. You’ve heard about the non-violence thingy in town, haven’t you?”

“I have, I have.”

“Well, that’s her doing. That victory over Dee and her lovey-dovey solidarity display in the Fort have turned her into everypony’s best friend. Now Dee’s tied up in a situation in which she can’t do anything without losing political favor. I intend to help her return to the spotlight.”

“Kicking Goldie in the flank, I see it.” Nadyr smiled. “Just how do you intend to do it?”

“Well, a friend I have in town told me about how things go down when it comes to politics in Freedom Field. After all, what the big lot demands is nothing but attention and care. In a nutshell, they want a leader that can come out and welcome you by your name and ask about your little filly.”

“That’s a rather stupid demand.”

“It is, but think about what kind of ponies we’re talking about. After all, they’re all Wastelanders in a different suit. They want to feel protected and cared for, that is all. If it wasn’t for that, what is the difference with the Wasteland itself?”

“I’m starting to see your point.” Nadyr looked up, then down, then back at me. “The common pony doesn’t care about economy or criminality, it doesn’t care about politics. It just cares about having something to eat, clean water, and a pinch of love and care from the ones above.”

“Exactly. Speaking of which, Dee’s decision of seizing control of the water supply hasn’t helped her all that much. Instead, I think that’s one of the things Goldie has used to contest Dee’s leadership.”

“Can’t she just let the water be free once again?”

“I don’t think so. Probably Goldie would use it by saying that Dee was chickening out or something like that. She can be tough to beat.”

“Yeah... How do you think you can outwit Goldie?”

“I would put my caps in a big display of power. Something that can’t be turned against Dee. Something visible and opulent, that shows the might of the Stringers.”

“A display of power? Really?” Nadyr gave me a smug look.

“All right, all right. It’s not the way to put it. What I want to say is that Dee needs to return to the spotlight in a way that nopony can turn against her. She needs to be the protagonist of something out of the ordinary, something grandiose. She needs to show that she’s back for good.”

“Now I see where you’re going. You want to turn her into the center of attention for good.”

“Exactly. We need to drive the population’s attention towards Dee, letting everypony in Freedom Field see she’s the good, caring leader she’s never stopped being.”

“Understood. We need something big. What did you have in mind?”

“I have obtained a juicy proposal from the NER, and I’m going to show it to Dee. However, I have the feeling that it might not be enough. That’s where you come in.”

“Me? How exactly?”

“I want you to work side by side with Rose. She’s scavenging and selling items in the market.”

“And how is that going to help you?”

“My idea was that Rose could use her position in the market as a spy, listening to all kinds of small talk that took place in the Trader Plaza. However, she’s become so successful that she can’t do both things. Therefore, I want you to do the listening part. Stand there as a helper or even as a security guard, and keep your ears open.”

“That doesn’t sound as a hard task.”

“See? It’s not like I’m asking you to be Dee Cleff’s gigolo.”

“Yeah, right...”

“Forget about the lame joke.” I shrugged. “Are you up for the challenge?”

“Well, I can be a masterful spy, you know?”

“That’s what you say. I need you to prove it.”

“Is that a challenge, Farsight?” Nadyr smirked.

“You can take it as a challenge, Nadyr.”

“It is on, bro. Wanna bet?”

“All right. I’ll pay you a fancy dinner if you manage to bring me something juicy.”

“Good. Start saving the caps, because you’ll be paying soon.”

We shook hooves to sign the agreement, looking at each other with a malicious smile in our faces. Being such a gold-digger, Nadyr was always up for a little wager. Therefore, the best way to make him do something was to offer him something in return. Also, if a bet could be stuck in between, that would make the half-zebra give it the best he’d got.

With Nadyr ready, we just needed to wait for the communications officer Harpsong had promised me. It was the second half of my plan in order to stir things in Freedom Field, and I wasn’t going to leave Nobuck without him, even if I was eager to get things moving.

Nadyr saw him before I did. A buck, rather young, came trotting from the Gummy Building. He was dressed in an old metal armor made out of scraps. His coat was of a faint bluish colour, and his mane was of a shining golden tone. He came towards us with a worried expression on his face.

“Are you Farsight, sir?” he asked.

“Yes, I am. This is Nadyr, my companion.”

“Hey there.” Nadyr smiled gently, trying to comfort the newcomer.

“I’m Communications Officer Hertzian Glow, of the First Army of the New Equestrian Republic.” He saluted by raising a hoof to his brow. “Vice-President Heartstrings has put me at your disposal.

“Good. Nice to meet you. Shall we get moving?”

“Yes, sir.”

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The treaty was pure gold. Harpsong had written down all my proposals, word by word, and she had signed it herself with a gracious, curly signature. With this in my hooves, I had a really powerful card to convince the gang leaders to join the NER. I'd show the treaty to Dee Cleff, and if it didn't work, I'd try the same with Ampera. Even if she liked things as they were, the agreement I was carrying was too tempting to refuse.

I led the way out of Nobuck at a relatively fast pace. Nadyr had no problems following me, but Hertzian couldn't keep up. I took a look at his saddlebags and saw that he was carrying quite a lot of equipment, apart from guns and ammo. No doubt he couldn't follow us, who were much less encumbered.

"Hertzian..."

"Communications Officer Hertzian, please."

"Hertzian. You're undercover now, keep that in mind. You're not supposed to act as an NER officer now. Therefore, let's cut the formalities short. I'm Farsight, he's Nadyr, and you're Hertzian. Is that a problem?"

"Not really, sir."

"Fine. And forget about the 'sir'. Call me Farsight. If anypony hears you address me or Nadyr as 'sir' it will sound fishy, and your cover will be compromised. I hope you have understood that."

"Yes, s... I mean, yes, Farsight."

"Great. Any more questions?"

"I have one. Could you give me details on the situation?"

"Didn't Harpsong brief you properly?"

"She did give me a briefing, but I can't really say it was proper."

"All right..." I sighed. I did expect something like this from Harpsong. "Let me explain the situation to you. The city of Freedom Field is resisting the assimilation to the NER by means of non-violence."

"Oh, yes. I've heard about that. I must admit it is an intelligent move."

"It is, as much as I hate to say it. They've blocked the whole army of the NER without having to waste a single bullet. So to speak, they're using the civilian population as a shield."

"Indeed. And if what Harpsong told me is correct, you're the one meant to break the stalemate."

"Exactly. However, I came across a series of problems that won't let me do any progress without any external help. And that's where you come in. You should already know there are four factions in town."

"Indeed. The Stringers, the Coilites, the Buckmares and the Followers of the Shy. The first two are friendly, the last two are hostile or at least not friendly."

"Good, you know the basics. What you need to know is that the two hostile factions, Buckmares and Followers, are allied because their leaders, Saddle Buckmare and Golden Swallow, are lovers. Your job is to make them break up."

"I see. How will I do that?"

"Are you good at inventing stories?"

"I work at the NER Propaganda Department. Inventing stories or mixing fact and fiction is my daily life."

"Perfect. Then you'll do fine. I need you to get into Freedom Field and gather all you might need to invent credible gossip meant to sow dissent between the two gangs."

"That will be easy as pie. However, how do you expect me to deliver those stories?"

"Be patient, Hertzian. You'll have the answers at the given time."

Hertzian looked at me with a puzzled face. I smiled smugly and trotted forward after having grabbed part of his equipment. We weren't far from the Relay Wave Radio Station, and before night fell, our group of three arrived at the small shack that had sheltered me in the Divide Storm. It was still half-covered in sand, like we

had left it.

“We’re here!” I cheered.

“What is this place?” Nadyr asked, puzzled.

“Walk in and you’ll see it.”

Nadyr opened the door and crept into the shack, with Hertzian following him closely. I entered the station in the last place and closed the door behind us. I didn’t want any surprise visitors while we were tinkering with the radio.

“Is this what I think it is?” Hertzian looked amazed.

“If you’re thinking a fully functional radio station, then it is.”

“But this is one hell of a discovery! We had read about the Relay Wave Network, but we thought it was a legend. We never expected to find one working!”

“This is Neighvada, remember? As far as I know, it’s not your usual piece of Wasteland.”

“It isn’t, indeed. Now, if you allow me...”

Hertzian unpacked his equipment and connected it to different sockets of the radio station. He knew what he was doing, alright. Unlike me, who had needed to check the Operator’s Hoofbook in order to even understand how that machinery worked, Hertzian was acting totally natural, as if he had been born connected to one of those stations.

“I think it’s ready to go, Farsight. We should do a test run.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Which frequency should I use?”

“I don’t know... we need this station to be heard, so we need to put ourselves in the spotlight. Is it possible to override the frequency of New Pegasus Radio?”

“Going for gold, eh?” Hertzian chuckled. “I’ll try. If this emitter is powerful enough, I should be able to get things running. Keep your ears open, gentlecolts!”

He was in his element alright. I stuck the PipBuck earbloom in my ear and switched to New Pegasus Radio. The soothing voice of Velvet Remedy, that lovely singer from Manhattan, boomed from the waves into my ears. Hertzian had closed the doors to the station room, to isolate himself from the noise of the world. The song carried on uninterrupted while I waited for Hertzian to either come out saying there was nothing to do or actually achieve something.

Suddenly, the music stopped abruptly. It wasn’t a fade-out, or a commercial break. The radio had gone silent. New Pegasus Radio was down. For a moment, I waited for Velvet Remedy’s voice to return, but instead, another sound filled the silence. The sound of a stallion voice roaring through the waves.

*This is Radio Nowhere, is there anypony alive out there?*

*This is Radio Nowhere, is there anypony alive out there?*

*Sweet, we are ON AIR! This is Radio Nowhere, the radio that brings you the news of the Wasteland, no matter how hard it hurts. We’ll be popping by every now and then to bring you special bulletins about what happens in the Neighvada Territory, both in Freedom Field and in the open Wasteland! So keep your ears ready for the juiciest information and the latest gossip, all of it in Radio Nowhere! And don’t worry about changing your dial setup, we’ll come to you!*

*This was Radio Nowhere, for anypony alive out there!*

*This was Radio Nowhere, for anypony alive out there!*

Hertzian became silent and the music of New Pegasus Radio returned once again, this time playing a solo of Octavia. I switched the PipBuck radio off and pulled the earbloom off my ear, waiting for Hertzian to come

out of the station. When he did, he looked radiant. He was grinning broadly, and his hoofsteps transmitted security and confidence. The broadcast had turned him into a totally different pony.

“Great job, Hertzian.” I clapped my hooves. “We have our little smear network ready. Now we just need content.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll handle the content as well.”

“Thank you, Hertzian. Just one thing...”

“Yes?”

“Why Radio Nowhere?”

“Uh... because this is a radio station in the middle of nowhere? To be honest, I hadn’t thought about it. It just sounded good to me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” I smiled and patted Hertzian’s back. “It’s fine. We’re about to bring chaos to Freedom Field, the least we should worry about is names.”

“All right. Radio Nowhere it is, then.”

“Fine, let’s get moving. We need to get to Freedom Field as soon as possible.”

We left the station hastily and Hertzian locked the door using a lock he had brought from Nobuck. It wouldn’t stop a determined robber, but at least it would deter raiders and Wasteland scum from using the place as a shelter. Once ready to go, we hit the road at a hasty pace. Night was starting to fall and a group of three wanderers would be a target for highwayponies.

While we galloped towards New Pegasus and Freedom Field, we managed to link up with a trader caravan coming from Divide Pass. By joining them in their way, we made sure that we wouldn’t be attacked by raiders. A bunch of heavily armed guards were a strong enough reason to keep the Wasteland scum away from the caravan. In exchange, we had to pay a little toll and get used to a slower pace.

We reached the Freedom Field gates the next morning. Before entering, I needed to make sure that Hertzian couldn’t be related to Nadyr or me.

“Hertzian,” I said, “this is where we must take separate ways. You can’t be seen close to us, or the locals will suspect there is something hidden between you and I. If you need to contact me, leave a message at Desert Rose’s stand in Trader Plaza. If you can’t find it, ask around. It’s the most popular shop in town, of that I’m sure. Best of luck, Hertzian. We’ll all need it.”

“Same to you, Farsight.”

He entered the city, leaving Nadyr and me waiting for a while. I was acting close to paranoid, but inserting Hertzian into Freedom Field was probably the most delicate part of the plan. Therefore, every move had to be planned and executed with extreme care. We waited outside Freedom Field for around an hour, and then we got back into town. It was time to add a bit of zebra spice to the mix.

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I left Nadyr to his own devices while I headed to start getting things ready for the next step on my plan. A plan that involved paying a little visit to my friend with benefits inside the Stringers. The music school was as soft and cozy as always, and the mare on the counter greeted me with a broad smile.

“Miss Metronome is in the Music Hall at the moment. If you want to talk to her, this would be a good time. She’ll be giving lessons in around half an hour.”

“I see. Then I’ll be meeting her immediately.”

“Please leave your guns at the counter and knock the door.”

“All right.”

I left my two rifles at the ring-shaped counter and trotted towards the Music Hall door. No sound was coming

from the inside, but anyway I knocked. The mare behind the counter was looking at me, and I didn't want to appear too familiar with Metronome.

"Come in."

I opened the door and walked into the Music Hall. Metronome was standing on stage, looking at the door with a smile on her face. I smiled and winked, closing my door with my hind leg at the same time.

"Hello, Metronome."

"Hello, Farsight. What is it you want?"

"Personally or professionally?"

"Cut the crap, Farsight. If you want to have sex, come at night to my room. Not now. We have foals around, don't you remember?"

"All right, all right, don't get all fired up. I come here with a proposal for Dee. A proposal that could break the strings she has."

"Speak up."

"As far as I know from my experience, the ponies in Freedom Field will support anypony who plays the role of a public figure in a rather active way. Following this principle, Goldie has started pushing Dee out of the spotlight by being very active in her role as a healer and as a political activist."

"I know that, but I assume you haven't finished."

"Indeed, I haven't. Dee's problem at the moment is that she can't do anything that Goldie can't turn against her, in a sign of weakness as a leader or disdain to the populace. What Dee needs is to be the center of attention, in a way that no pony can use to discredit her."

"That sounds reasonable. What do you suggest?"

"We need something big, something truly epic. Something the population will remember."

"Something like what?"

"Something like this." I smiled and unpacked the treaty proposal signed by Harpsong.

Metronome picked the scribbled paper and started studying it. Her face quickly switched from the initial disbelief to a mild surprise, then to a big surprise, later to a big smile of satisfaction, to end up with a smirk of happiness. She looked at me with a satisfied expression and gave me back the treaty.

"This is impressive, Farsight! With something like this, all our problems would be over!"

"Indeed. All the resistance would be pointless."

"Yes, but..." Metronome curled her muzzle, worried about something.

"What is wrong, Metronome?"

"I am afraid Goldie might use this against us. She will surely say we have surrendered to the NER, and that will mean our downfall."

"I see where you're going."

"No doubt you do. My point is we can't use it like this, not now. We need something else. Something to move Goldie out of the spotlight."

"And what could we do?"

"We need something that she can't use against us. Something that isn't a political move by itself."

"Like what? A charity raffle, maybe?"

"A charity raffle is good, but we need something with a bit more of punch."

"Well, I'm all out of ideas." I shrugged.

“You know, Miss Cleff has become worried about her biological clock, if you know what I mean.”

“No, Metronome, I don’t know what you mean.”

Metronome facehoofed and snickered.

“For being so smart, Farsight, you can be so naive sometimes. She feels she’s getting old without having foals.”

“All right, Metronome. Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“Ugh. Forget about it, okay? I’m suggesting we find Miss Cleff a good husband and celebrate a top class wedding. That will draw the population’s attention, and Goldie will have no way of using it against us.”

“That sounds interesting indeed. Do you have a suitable candidate?”

“Hm... Not really. However, I think this is a matter we should discuss with Miss Cleff herself, don’t you agree?”

“Fair enough.”

“This is what we’ll do, Farsight. We’re going to have lunch at the LaGrande. Meet us there and show the treaty to her. Then we’ll tackle the marriage issue together.”

“You know her better than I do, Metronome. It’s your call.”

“I couldn’t have said it better. Oh, and one thing, Farsight. The LaGrande is a rather fancy place, so find something proper to wear.”

“I have my suit.”

“Well go change. I have to give some lessons now.”

I nodded and smiled at her, then I turned around and left for my room. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, I was ready to have lunch in one of the best restaurants in town, courtesy of Dee Cleff. In cases like this, I loved my job.

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The LaGrande was a small restaurant that had been opened before the War started, and it had kept serving food ever since. A large sign on the entrance showcase boasted about the place’s longevity: *LaGrande Restaurant. Serving the finest foods in town for 244 years. Even the Apocalypse couldn’t make us close!* I smirked at the announcement and entered the restaurant.

It wasn’t a very large place, indeed, but it felt very comfortable and welcoming. The walls were decorated with soft-colored wallpaper, something between a dark beige and a light brown. Wooden panels covered the low half of the walls, while the floor was composed of a myriad of small tiles, forming a mosaic. The light came out of ceiling-hung lamps that projected a gentle yellowish light, far warmer than the imposing white neon light that one could find almost everywhere in Freedom Field.

Six tables with their corresponding white linen and tableware were distributed along the room, far enough from each other to ensure the privacy of the clients. It was the best place to stage a meeting, no doubt. Dee and Metronome were waiting for us at the farthest table. Dee was wearing a light gray suit that fit her very well, showing that she was also a fairly beautiful mare. Taking that into account, it wasn’t all that surprising to know that Metronome hid her attractive when being close to her boss.

“Mares...” I got close to the table while smiling gently at Dee.

“Farsight, good to see you again.” Dee smiled back. Courtesy was one of her strong points. She could be about to stab you, but she would be very polite.

“Thank you, Miss Cleff. Mind if I call you Dee?”

“Go ahead. You’re the first one that ever asked me that. They either do or do not, but they don’t ask.”

“Thanks again, Dee.”

“You’re welcome.”

“What do you want to eat?”

“I don’t know. What’s good around here?” I asked.

“Try the gecko steak. It’s probably the finest dish in the whole menu. Don’t even think on asking for vegetables. They’re all from before the War.”

“I see. In that case, I’ll have the steak.”

“Good choice. *Garçon!* Three steaks and a bottle of wine!”

One of the waiters nodded at Dee’s order and darted towards the kitchen. Suddenly, the place came alive with the sound of sizzling pans and muffled orders. Just a minute later, the waiter came back with an shiny bottle of wine. He uncorked it in a swift move and poured a small quantity into Dee’s glass. She tasted it and nodded. With her approval, the waiter poured the red wine into our glasses.

“Neighpa Valley. The NER has a fine taste when it comes to wine.” Dee smiled out of pure satisfaction.

I took a sip of the dark red wine. It was soft and velvety, and it tasted like wood and fresh fruit, with an aftertaste I couldn’t make out. Indeed, this one was one fine drink, not like the booze the Buckmares served.

“It’s very good.” I left the glass on the table and nodded. “There’s something that tastes off, however.”

“It’s the radiated soil. Don’t worry, it’s not dangerous.”

“I see. Guess I’m not used to drinking.”

“Maybe.” Dee nodded. “However, I think you haven’t come here to speak about wines, am I right?”

“You’re right.”

“Good. Now, Metronome has told me about your achievements, but she insisted in meeting and discussing it in person.”

“Indeed, she thought it would be the best.”

“Well, here we are. What is it you wanted to talk about?”

I lifted the treaty from one of my pockets and laid it on the table, right in front of Dee. She immediately began studying it carefully, reading the legal agreements displayed in it. Her expression followed a path similar to the one of Metronome, maybe being a bit more cautious in her smiles. After having read it twice, she looked at me with pure respect in her eyes.

“I am really amazed, Farsight. This is what I had been wishing for.”

“My pleasure, Dee. I want this situation solved as soon as possible.”

“Excuse me, Miss Cleff.” Metronome coughed lightly to attract our attention. “I don’t want to spoil your happiness, but there is an intrinsic problem to this treaty.”

“Which one, Metronome?”

“Goldie can turn this into an attempted surrender to the NER. That would definitely mean our downfall as the leading force in Freedom Field.”

“Damn.” Dee stomped the floor in anger. “You’re right, Metronome, as usual. What do you suggest we do?”

“Where there is a crisis, there is opportunity, Miss Cleff. I think we should tackle another problem you’ve been experiencing. How about we find you a suitable husband?”

“Husband? What are you talking about?”

“Dee, if I may...” I added. “What Metronome suggests is staging a grand celebration to drive the attention away from Goldie. Such display can’t be used as a political weapon, and also, that would provide a solution to your worries about forming a dynasty.”

“Wait a minute, did Metronome tell you about it?”

“Yes, but you can trust my discretion. I won’t tell anypony.”

“I swear, if this comes out of this room, I’ll have you shot, Farsight.”

“Please, Dee. Don’t let rage cloud your mind. Think about the benefits.”

Dee took another sip of wine while thinking about what I just had said. In the meantime, I gave Metronome a worried look. Things could get messy if Dee didn’t accept our proposal.

“All right.” Dee grunted. “It wasn’t the best approach, but you’ve got your point. I really want to have foals sooner or later, and a wedding would give us enough momentum to sign the treaty and get away with it. However, we first have to find a suitable candidate. Have you thought of any?”

“What about Saddle Buckmare?” I proposed. “Well, he’s a fine stallion. Strong and well built. Maybe a bit too prone to rage, but if Goldie has taken him under control, I have no doubt you would be able to do the same. Besides, he has control of the second most powerful gang in town. It would piss Goldie and the resulting union would be very strong.”

Metronome and Dee looked at each other and snickered silently.

“Stallions...” Dee smiled.

“Farsight, if Miss Cleff would have wanted to marry Saddle, she would have done it a long time ago. Besides, if we’re speaking of a political marriage, look at Ampera. Rumour has it she’s after Saddle as well, and she’s been a powerful ally for us. Taking Buckmare would most probably force her to join Goldie. Besides, Ampera has always supported the union with the NER. Let her do the job of bringing Saddle to our side, while we care about taking Goldie down for good.”

“Hm. I guess that’s reasonable.”

“Of course it’s reasonable.” Dee smirked. “How about you, Farsight?”

“Me?” I winced, surprised.

“Well, you sure are a handsome specimen.” Dee smiled and looked me up and down. “And you’re smart, very smart. Not to forget your speech abilities. You could be a great ambassador for Freedom Field.”

“Sorry to let you down, Dee, but I don’t think I’m the one either. I have made myself too many enemies in this city to be a good bet. Taking me as your husband would probably cause Saddle and Goldie to openly declare war on you, and honestly, I don’t believe that’s what you’re looking for.”

“I must agree with Farsight on this one, Miss Cleff.”

“All right, all right. I do have the feeling that you’re chickening out, Farsight. Still, the reasons you offer me are logical.”

“Somepony from New Pegasus?” I asked, running out of choices.

“Who would leave the comfort of New Pegasus to come and marry me? Even the most humble Citizen lives a better life than me.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“Maybe, but my point stands. New Pegasus is out of the question.”

“What are we looking for, exactly?” I asked.

“Somepony not affiliated to any of the gangs. Preferably wealthy or charismatic. Also, he would have to be young and capable of breeding. Also, being handsome is a plus.”

“All things considered, I must say I am totally out of ideas.” I shrugged.

“Me too.” Metronome looked at Dee.

“Then all this plan will have to be postponed, I’m afraid.”

We turned to our plates, as our idea for taking over Freedom Field had suffered a sudden stop. The gecko steak was, indeed, a tasty meal, with a strong flavour and a spicy aftertaste. However, I didn't enjoy it as much as I would have enjoyed it if our plan had been successful.

"Farsight..." Dee said. I looked up to see her in the eyes.

"We'll keep looking for somepony suitable for me. In the meantime, I free you of your commitments to us. You could return to the NER and tell them the current situation, but I believe that we agree on thinking that it's better to wait until we're ready to sign the treaty."

"It is the best idea, indeed. I'll pull some strings myself to help you in the search."

"No, Farsight. This time, you're out of the game. As you said, you attract too much attention from the rest of the gangs. If Goldie knows you're messing around, she'll see through all our scheme, and I am NOT going to let this happen. And before you say anything, this is not negotiable."

"I see." I kept eating in silence.

This was a de facto banishment from Freedom Field, coming from Dee herself. I was rather worried about our future, but first I would have to speak with Nadyr and Rose about it. Maybe they would have thought something out in case we had to hit the road.

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After lunch, I returned to the Trader Plaza, hoping to meet Rose and Nadyr at the stand. I walked with a rather fast pace, not because I was in a hurry, but because my mind and my body had a tendency to act together. Therefore, since my mind was at full activity, my body was acting hastily as well.

When I arrived at the stand, I found to my surprise that it was empty, and that none of my companions was nowhere to be found. With haste, I started looking for them in the market, asking the vendors for the filly and the half-zebra. Such a pair couldn't have gone unnoticed. However, it seemed it had been a very busy day, since no pony had seen them in the whole morning.

I returned to the stand. Maybe they had left to find more goods, and if that was the case, they would return to Trader Plaza sooner or later. However, if they didn't return quickly, I would have to widen the search and look for them in the whole Freedom Field, which wasn't easy at all. My only relief was that Nadyr and Rose were together, which turned them into a well-armed couple.

"Farsight!" I heard somepony call. When I turned around, I found myself facing Sunberry.

"Hi, Sunberry. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Thanks for asking. What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for Rose and Nadyr, the half-zebra that must have come here earlier."

"Oh, yes, I know who you mean. They won't come back."

"What do you mean, they won't come back?"

"They told me they'd run out of supplies and left their booth for the day. I suppose they've gone home, wherever that is."

"Thanks, Sunberry."

"No problem."

I darted out of Trader Plaza, headed for the Music School. If Rose had returned home, she had to be in her room. I galloped down the streets of Freedom Field, trying to reach my target as soon as possible, in order to plan my next move with the help of my companions. The door of the Music Hall was open wide when I buzzed past it, and the stairs trembled under my hooves like a quick drumroll. I lowered my pace when getting close to my room, and opened the door of the one next to it. Rose was lying on the bed, looking at the ceiling with a bored expression, while Nadyr sat by the window.

"Farsight!" Rose jumped from the bed and ran to me, wrapping me in a tight hug.

“Hello, Rose.” I hugged her back. “Sunberry told me you had left the market. What is wrong?”

“Well, we have got bad news. We’re running out of places to loot.”

“Come on, are you kidding me?”

“No, Farsight.” Nadyr moved from his place near the window. “Rose has a natural talent for scavenging. In a nutshell, we’re doing too good. If we keep at this rate, we’ll soon run out of items to sell, so I’ve suggested that we take the teleporter and go on a scavenging trip.”

“How convenient. I hate to break this up to you, but we might have to leave Freedom Field soon.”

“What happened?” Rose emitted a high-pitched squeak of angst.

“It’s a long story, but I’ll fill you in.”

I started briefing both Nadyr and Rose about the meeting I had had with Metronome and Dee, explaining them the conditions of the treaty I had signed with the NER. Rose listened carefully, and nodded softly every now and then, trying to show us clearly that she was getting the hang of the conversation. Nadyr, meanwhile, looked at me with a worried face. Then, I told them about the marriage plan Metronome had woven, what caused the half-zebra to smirk and Rose to open her muzzle in surprise.

“Dee is going to marry somepony?” Rose asked.

“Yes, but they have to find somepony fitting. In the meantime, they don’t want us meddling around, since they fear Goldie might know I have something to do about it. In a nutshell, they want us to leave Freedom Field for a while.”

“Then this is the best time to exploit my discovery.” Nadyr said.

“You mean the teleporter?”

“Of course. Think about it. Rose is in a dire need of finding new wares to sell, whereas you need to disappear for a while. I suggest we tackle both problems at once by heading to Neighborleans.”

“Hmmm...” I looked at the floor, meditating about Nadyr’s offer. He did have a point. “Rose, what do you think?”

“Well, Nadyr is right. I need to find more stuff or I’ll have to stop selling. I say we go.”

I looked at Rose, and then switched to Nadyr, who looked at me with eager eyes.

“What do you say, Farsight? To Neighborleans?”

I sighed.

“Fine. To Neighborleans.”

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Note: Reputation change

Stringers: Partially banished. This faction has kindly asked you to leave for a while, until things clear up. If you disobey, they might not be all that kind the next time.

**END OF ACT II**

***ACT III: NOON***

## Chapter 9: Green River

*“Good afternoon everypony, this is Mister New Pegasus wishing that you’ve had enjoyed your meal while listening to this very station, New Pegasus Radio! This last piece of musical magnificence was discovered in an abandoned Stable some years ago by a scavenger. The poor fellow had been fighting for his life against a pack of Nightstalkers when he came across a bunch of old records. In his place, I would have understood that he left them, but he didn’t! He picked them up and sold them to a trader, who brought them over to the station. Without knowing it, we had found one of Octavia’s best concerts, which is what we’ll be playing for the next hour.*

*Bzzzt... wheee... click!*

*This is Radio Nowhere! Is there anypony alive out there? Good, because if you’re listening, we’ve got some serious issues going down in Freedom Field and the Wasteland, and we’re here to bring them over to you! First of all, rumour has it that Miss Dee Cleff, the renowned public figure, has started looking for her significant other! Hooves up for her, everypony! We still don’t know the name of the lucky buck, but we at Radio Nowhere wish the upcoming couple the best for the future!*

*Also, our reporters snooped a conversation between Golden Swallow, the leader of the Followers of the Shy, and an unknown stallion, and I tell you folks, things aren’t going peachy for the happy couple she and Saddle Buckmare form. We’re preparing the recording to be aired in a later broadcast, but I can give you some snippets. For example, Goldie says that Saddle is an ‘irresponsible dick with no backbone to take on the city’ and that she would ‘tell Dee and Ampera to buzz off’. If you think this is heavy, wait until you hear the whole recording!*

*Remember, this is Radio Nowhere, bringing the latest news in Freedom Field directly to your radios! Stay tuned for more gossip!*

*Bzzzt... wheee... click!*

*Those damn pirates... they keep ruining my news bulletins... oh, wait, are we back in? Sorry for the inconvenience, let me assure you that New Pegasus Radio is working day and night to find out where the interference comes from and put an end to it. In the meantime, let me present my sincerest apologies for this problem, and let me remind you that New Pegasus Radio doesn’t share the opinions expressed by this pirate radio.*

*Moving on to the Ferratura murder case, yesterday Chief Investigator Brass Badge ordered the imprisonment of three employees of The Clops Resort under the charges of assault and criminal conspiracy. The decision has been cheered by the public relations department of the Platinum Horseshoe, whereas the spokespony for the Ferratura family considered this an outrage. Let’s just keep in mind that the poor fellow that was attacked is still under intensive care in the New Pegasus General Hospital, his life still on the line.*

*That was all the news for now, everypony. Now, let’s return to some lovely music, shall we? As I told you, we’re dedicating a special day to commemorate one of the great Octavia’s finest concerts, the Live at the Canterlot Bowl. This piece we’ll hear next is the famous “March of the Parasprites”, played by Octavia and the Equestrian Philharmonic Orchestra. Enjoy this magnificent work of art, and remember that you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and that I’m your favourite host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...*

Talking about spreading chaos.

Hertzian was doing a really fine job. Since I left him, he had already started doing his job, diligently. Every two or three times a day, the signal of New Pegasus Radio would be overridden by the rogue broadcast of Radio Nowhere, and the things aired on Hertzian’s shows weren’t light stuff precisely. I had some worries about how much content he was spewing out, and what the listeners felt about it outside of asking Stuka. Anyway, only time would tell if it was having our desired effect.

Time we were going to spend in Neighorleans.

Nadyr led the way towards the teleport booth, and while I trusted his plan and allowed him to take charge, my mind grew weary over being dragged around by somepony that didn't seem all that concerned about the well being of his companions.

Ever since leaving Freedom Field he had been gambling on our lives. Whereas I liked to stay close to the roads, and keep to open spaces: Nadyr preferred canyons and chasms wherever possible. Sticking to unconventional roads that no pony sane would ever want to use for travelling.

Which made them, at least to me, obvious hiding places for raiders, and scum seeking safety from NER patrols or armed caravans. Nadyr assured me that my fears were unfounded, and days passed without encountering a single pony while we made our way towards the East and this teleporter of his.

In my desire to be useful while camping, I took up the tasks of heating dinner from cans of the relatively safe, but tasteless pre-War food, as Nadyr did not harbour any desire to hunt and trying out nor did he make any move towards hunting any local wildlife.

Instead him and Rose started chatting about the swamp ahead of us and the sort of environment we were going to face.

When asked about his homeland and dealing with Rose's naive questions Nadyr adopted the stern manners of a school teacher, speaking about his homeland with clarity and brevity.

I have to commend him for his ability, and took in the relevant dangers of the swamps, how to deal with them, and noted down briefly the marvels of a much different ecosystem, while Rose was able to settle into a rather childlike reverence and amazement.

Apart from the irradiated water, and a brief history about the various megaspells that had painted Neighorleans, Nadyr's tale of the fauna made me think that almost every single thing still alive in that pit of swamp would eat us alive, poison us, burn us to a crisp, or paralyze us. Leading me to make the conclusion that it'd be best to maintain a shoot on sight, ask questions later policy.

It made me appreciate my rifle more, and I kept it close during the night watches. A fine piece of engineering, robust, reliable. I took to cleaning it often to keep it that way while loathing the lack of NER protection.

This one wasn't my first night watch, nor would it be the last. Most of them had been peaceful, nothing-goes-wrong nights, where the greatest danger of keeping watch was to fall asleep. However, there was always the danger of being ambushed, what made me rather nervous. Sadly for me, that was going to be one of those nights.

With my sight limited to only a couple of meters because of the lack of light, I was relying on the rest of my senses to grasp perception of what happened in the area. At night, the Wasteland used to be silent. At the moment, however, I could hear a silent rustling. A very slight noise, like the fizzing sound of sand in the wind, but intermitent. Plus, there was no wind, so it had to be the sound of something coming close. Besides, I'd bet my hooves at the fact that we were being stalked by somepony.

I moved forward to wake Nadyr up, while I left Rose sleeping. He groaned a little when I patted him on the back, but he quickly got up. While he was stretching out, I made him a sign to keep silent.

"What's the problem?" Nadyr whispered.

"I think we're being stalked."

"Stalked? By whom?"

"I don't know. I've heard noises that don't sound natural. There is something lurking around."

"Aw, hell."

We stood back to back, aiming our weapons to the great darkness of the night. The cloud cover was especially thick in the area, which made the night far darker than in the area close to Nobuck, for example. The noises could be heard clearly now that we were paying full attention to the world around us. There was

something out there, without a doubt. Whatever it was, it took great care on keeping out of our sight, concealed in darkness.

“Come out where we can see you!” Nadyr yelled.

“Like that’s going to happen...”

I scouted the darkness, looking for a hint of what could be after us. Whatever it was, it knew the basics of fighting. It had us pinned down close to the bonfire, turning in circles, while it was playing with our psyche. What was this thing that stalked us? Was it a beast, a pony, or something more eldritch and unknown? After all, the Wasteland liked to surprise its inhabitants every once in a while with a new and innovative abomination. And what did it want from us?

“Shit, this is taking forever.” Nadyr groaned.

“I know. Any ideas?”

“You’re the bright guy. I’m the muscle. You do the thinking!”

“Why, thanks for the trust, Nadyr.”

I clenched my teeth and looked forward, to the rim of light on the floor. There were hoofstep marks close to the limit between light and darkness, so what was following us had to be a pony or a zebra. Also, it was moving dangerously close to our visibility area, so it was only a matter of time that our stalker made a mistake. I breathed deep and looked at the floor, waiting for a hoof to appear in the dim light of the fire.

The seconds seemed to last minutes, the minutes seemed to last hours. I tried to empty my mind of any thoughts as I turned in circles, looking for the key hoof. Our stalker was still there, running around, but why hadn’t he attacked yet? Why hadn’t he fired? Was it because we were armed as well?

“Farsight!” Nadyr yelled. He saw a hoof and fired his gun.

The flash lit the darkness of the Wasteland night, revealing our stalker. It was a pony indeed, clad in an intricate red and gold armor, very ornate and delicate. His head was covered with a leather helmet with goggles, decorated with spikes resembling a dragon’s spine. He was brandishing a makeshift blade, and he didn’t seem to carry any more guns, that being the reason why he hadn’t fired or attacked. He was waiting for us to lower our guard. I raised my rifle and aimed as quickly as possible, then I shot.

**BLAM!**

The flash showed the stalker pony falling aside, wounded in one of the legs. He wouldn’t die from that wound, but it would hurt him quite a lot. In the meantime, we could try to get some information from him. But first, we needed to bring him to our bonfire. We trotted close and I used my telekinesis to drag him to our camp. Rose had leapt, frightened with the shot. She was looking around like crazy.

“Where did you hit him, Farsight?” Nadyr asked.

“In the leg, if I’m not mistaken. Why?”

“Cause he’s dead.”

“That’s impossible.”

“Whatever. He’s dead. Gone. Kaputt.”

I looked at our stalker, now victim. Indeed, he had no breath and his eyes looked into the void of death. How on this world could a leg shot become an instant kill?

“How is this possible?”

Nadyr sniffed the dead stalker’s mouth and winced.

“Shit. Cyanide.”

“Poison?”

“Ayep. Instant death. Whoever this pony was, he didn’t want to be caught.”

I started searching the dead pony for loot or information. The armor was light, mostly made out of leather covered with some light metal plates, probably tin or brass. However, it had a lot of time and dedication behind it, looking at the details and the decoration. It had this antique feel, like the one on the pictures I had seen in the Stable books. I just couldn’t tell where I had seen it.

There was something more to the armor. A motif was recurrent all along it. There were dragons in each and every corner of the armor, and I found a small tin necklace with the shape of a dragon’s head. I slid the necklace into my saddlebag. Something told me this wasn’t the first of these guys I was going to see.

“Found it!” Nadyr yelled.

“What did you find?”

“A vial! He must have chugged the poison when you shot him.”

“Yeah. He has nothing on him, otherwise. Who do you think this buck was?”

“I don’t know.” Nadyr shrugged. “Never seen this kind of armor. It’s not the usual pony armor, it has something... exotic.”

“Exotic, like zebras?”

“Fuck you, Farsight. I have NEVER seen this armor.”

“Okay, okay, don’t get all fired up. You have never seen the armor, I get it. However, he seemed to be some sort of scout. He was equipped to go lightly, no guns, only a blade. That, and a vial of poison in case he got captured.”

“A scout? For whom?”

“I don’t know. Keep your eyes out for dragon heads. Otherwise, I’m going to sleep now. G’night.”

I plummeted onto the floor and closed my eyes, while Nadyr sat down on the dead scout and started cleaning his revolver. It didn’t take me all that long to fall asleep.

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“Holy Celestia’s fuck!” I exclaimed.

“This is AMAZING!” Rose said, her jaw almost hitting the floor.

“My words exactly.” Nadyr smiled broadly at my reaction.

We had trotted for a couple of hours since we packed up and left the rotting body of the dead scout behind us. Suddenly, the road had opened and had confronted us with a massive canyon to our right and a huge water reservoir to our left. In the middle, the road trod over a gigantic wall of concrete that separated both parts, holding the massive volume of water captive. It was frankly breathtaking to see the massiveness of that construction.

“What the hell is this?” I was having a really hard time to keep my muzzle closed.

“This is Hooper Dam. One of the marvels of Pre-War engineering. Don’t ask me how, but there’s a power plant in there. That’s where all the electricity for New Pegasus and Freedom Field comes from.”

“Sounds like a nice catch for the NER. Controlling the power would give them the edge over New Pegasus.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what we were sent to scout. Of course they want the damn dam, but they don’t want to rush.”

“And why is it?”

“Beats me.”

“Fair enough.”

We began to cross the Dam. While Nadyr advanced at a steady pace, I looked at all sides with my face turned into a rictus of amazement. I could see all the course of the river Coltrando from there. I could see how it arched between the mountains, to end up widening and forming what I assumed was Lake Honeyeard.

“Come on, Farsight! Catch up!”

Nadyr and Rose were already on the far end of the Dam. I galloped to meet up with them, and we set off to find the bunker he had been talking about. It was time to search for treasure.

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“Is this the place?”

We had stopped close to a small shack, about two by two meters in surface, half covered in dust and desert vegetation. My PipBuck hadn't even bothered on indicating that I had found some new location. I had always thought that a teleport booth would look more imposing, more futuristic. Instead, it looked like a puffed-up phone booth half-swallowed by the Wasteland.

“It's bigger in the inside.” Nadyr shrugged. “Let's go.”

Nadyr opened the shack door and we got into the booth. It did feel somewhat bigger in the inside, mostly because the shack was empty, except for a couple of benches and the teleporter. As it seemed, this was planned to be used as a mass transport system. The teleporter itself stood in the middle of the room, connected to a myriad of cables and wires. It was a void cylinder, glowing in blue and green, welcoming us to step into it.

“I don't like how it looks...” I shivered.

“Me neither, but I like the look of gold. Let's go, Farsight. I haven't come this far to back down now.”

“I know that.” I sighed. “However, are you sure this will work?”

“Come on, Farsight. You know the answer to that question.”

“Let me guess. You have no idea.”

“Exactly!” Nadyr laughed. “I HAVE NO IDEA! Now let's get crackin'!”

I shrugged, asking myself questions about Nadyr's sanity, and followed the hyped half-zebra to the teleporter cylinder. As we crossed the halo of light that delimited the teleporter's perimeter, I started feeling a strange current fill the air, causing rippling spasms in my muscles. Nothing too heavy, but it was a quite unsettling feeling. Nadyr, on the other hoof, seemed undeterred by the imposing unknown that was the functionality and accuracy of the teleporting system we were about to use.

“And how are we supposed to get this thing running?” I asked.

“Easy, bro. The thing is pre-programmed. The user only has to push the big red button.”

“How do you know that, if I may ask?”

“There's a nice thing over there, at the small cabinet on the wall, called Instruction Booklet. If you took your time to read it, you'd discover how easy it is to operate one of these.”

I smirked at Nadyr's smug retort. There was nothing to say, in that case. If he had read an instruction book, he'd know best, so I shrugged and nodded.

“My bad. Go ahead.”

“All right, mares and gentlecolts! Please buckle up for this one-way ride to Neighborleans! Estimated trip duration is... meh, who cares! Let's GO!”

With a howl of victory, Nadyr slammed his hoof on the big red button with the engraving 'Activate' on it, and the machine started humming and buzzing. I was no technician, but common sense told me that a buzzing machine wasn't a healthy machine. However, Nadyr didn't seem to care too much about the teleporter's condition. Instead, he was whistling and singing in tune with the machine's noises.

“Nadyr, are you sure this is working properly?” I asked, rather scared.

Before my companion could give me an answer, the teleporter emitted a loud, screeching noise and the world itself vanished in the dark.

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Being teleported is not a nice feeling. Not at all. When all our atoms got hurled across the world at an unfathomable speed, my senses simply got nullified. All I saw was a dark tunnel of eldritch shapes and impossible colors, twisting and turning in all directions. To give a similar image, I was seeing things similar to those impossible, shifting shapes and shiny tunnels you see when you close your eyes after a hard day. These ones, however, were vivid and massive, and I swear I had the feeling of having my eyes wide open.

Also, the only thing I could hear was a loud, low-pitched rumbling that echoed across all infinity. Any other sound, if there was any, got drowned in the reverberating madness of the teleporter’s void. My ears, or at least what I thought were my ears, vibrated like crazy, sending ripples of pain through.

That was not the worst, though. I had the feeling of having been stuck in a cocktail shaker. I was being hurled around by impossible forces, gravity being first down, then up, then down again. My nerve system was being overrun by forces and signals that didn’t add up, as if all the laws of Physics had been ruled out and the world had been swallowed by a vortex of pure, unmodified chaos.

My body, or what I thought had to be my body in this impossible, chaotic space, was screaming for an instant of rest. Literally, I needed to get off, or I’d collapse. My brain was being bombarded by inconsistent data and sensations, first pain, then dizziness, then pressure, then cold, then heat, then stress, then speed, then pain again. If this carried on for much longer, my mind would simply snap.

I felt like I had been thrown down a massive rollercoaster, my brain bouncing against invisible walls, about to be torn apart by forces that I didn’t get to understand. My nerves couldn’t bear any more of this punishment that didn’t seem to end, and at some point I blacked out. In hindsight, I assume it was some sort of emergency shutdown in order to avoid greater pains, but it was something else.

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I felt the smell before anything else. It was a horrible stench, deep and disgusting, that made my gut churn. It was the smell of stagnant water and decay, the reek of everlasting death and decomposition, the stink of rotting organic matter. In a nutshell, it was the smell of a big, massive swamp. It seemed like the teleporter had worked, after all.

I opened my eyes to find myself in a shack similar to that of the Neighvada desert. The teleporter cylinder was there, humming and lighting the small room in a greenish light. I got back up on my hooves and shook my head, trying to deplete all the remaining traces of dizziness left in my brain. Then I took a look around the place, trying to get back into action.

There were not many differences from this place to the shack in the other end of the teleporter. The same useless neon lights, the same big teleporter cylinder in the middle of the room, the same benches in the corners. If I was to spot a difference, I’d say the place looked a bit dirtier, a bit rustier than the desert booth. There was another key difference, though. Nadyr and Rose were nowhere to be found.

I can’t say I panicked, but my heartbeat became rushed and irregular when I found myself alone. I relied on having Nadyr by my side when it came to exploring the city, since he was the one that knew about the potential dangers of the Neighborleans swamp. Finding myself on my own was a bit of a setback. Besides, I did worry about both him and Rose. After the bumpy teleporter ride, I was afraid he hadn’t made it to the other end. For no reason, I started looking around the place, trying to find evidence that showed that Nadyr and Rose had come out of the teleporter void in good shape.

There was nothing in the teleporter, nothing on the benches, nothing on the walls that told me they were alive and kicking, and I was starting to get seriously worried. I checked every corner of the room, but there was nothing that spoke about the half-zebra or the filly’s presence. Worried sick, I was about to leave the room when I remembered about what Nadyr had told us in the other end. There had to be a small cabinet

somewhere in the shack, a cabinet that I hadn't found yet.

I returned to check the room once again, looking for anything that could resemble a small storage space. After a frantic search through the walls, I had found nothing. Once again, panic started rising towards my mind. I sat on my flanks and massaged my head with my forehooves, trying to keep calm. I had to think properly if I wanted to succeed, with or without Nadyr. I looked up at the teleporter cylinder, and I found myself looking at a small protuberance on the back of the machine. A box-like protuberance. A Celestia-damned cabinet.

I leapt forward and opened the cabinet harshly. I found what I expected to find: the operation instructions of the teleporter, some old, rusty tools and some replacement breakers. There was something else, however. A piece of paper, seemingly ripped from the booklet, floated out of the cabinet and fell slothfully to the floor. Something had been scribbled in it.

*Farsight,*

*Since you've had a bit of a hard ride, we have decided to leave you here to rest. We're going to scout forward. When you are ready, come and look for us. Neighborleans can't be that big anyway.*

*Just keep out of the water and you'll be good.*

*Catch you later, bro.*

*Nadyr (and Rose)*

So, they were alive, after all. I sighed and smiled, feeling quite relieved. I was still alone, but the three of us were doing fine, so we could combine our efforts and search for that promised loot. I discarded the small note, cocked my rifle and checked my armor. Everything was on its place, now it was time to get out to face our new environment, the Neighborleans swamp.

I opened the shack gate and came out of it. The smell of decay coming from the surrounding swamp made my gut twist in disgust, but I forced myself to breathe deep, in order to get used to the horrible smell. Well, after ten minutes breathing that mushy, stinky marsh air, it wasn't that terrible after all. The natural light was blinding me, as the neon tubes in the teleporter shack weren't working and my eyes had got used to the dim glow the teleporter emitted.

When my eyes finally managed to see something apart from a blinding whiteness, I found myself looking up to a shiny green dome, made out of entwined branches and leaves of lush, huge trees. As Nadyr had said, there was no way to get through that heavy cover. Even light had serious issues to sip through the several layers of foliage, and the one that managed to enter the dome was tinted in a greenish colour, giving the place an otherworldly feel.

Amazed by the massive dome hanging above me, I lowered my sight to look at the city I had just entered. I expected to see something like Freedom Field, a city in an acceptable state, but I found myself looking at a large, half sunken ruin. Wrecked buildings stood out of the stagnant swamp water, like the fangs of a massive beast, greenish vegetal life growing out of the mud and clinging onto the debris.

The roads were cracked and sunken in many places, nature slowly winning the battle for the dominance against the advances of ponykind. Electric cables, long rendered useless, floated slothfully like some sort of water snake, curling and stretching with every ripple in the water. A water that was, like Nadyr had told me, a death trap of wildlife and radiation. Speaking of which, my PipBuck had started clicking as soon as I got out of the shack, letting me know that the place wasn't the safest to stay.

I looked at the device attached to my leg. The screen was flashing a red warning: +2 rads/second. That was not good, so I had better get going. I tried to ubicate myself using the PipBuck map, but that feature didn't seem to work in this place. Apparently, the PipBuck had been deconfigured in the teleporter ride. All that appeared when I tried to switch to the map screen was a flashing message saying "Connection Lost".

"Oh, seriously. What the crap?" I scowled. Well, I would have to move the old way.

I looked around trying to get a grip on my location. Without the help of the PipBuck map, I would have to

rely on other things to orientate myself, such as the E.F.S. compass, which, thank Celestia, was still working; and on local reference points. At the moment, I was standing on a hill, judging from the water surrounding me. The hill was crossed by north-south road, that descended on both sides, being the teleporter booth the highest part.

My first objective was to find Rose and Nadyr. They could be anywhere within the large dome, but my gut told me they hadn't gone too far. If the water was as deadly as Nadyr had told me, they would still be trying to find a way out of this island. With a pinch of luck, I would be able to hook up with them rather quickly.

I started descending the road to the south. The slope was gentle but constant, and the smell of stagnant water became more and more intense as I walked forward. Also, as I advanced, I began to see the remnants of a massive city that came out of the water. Most of it were ruins of high-rise buildings, crumbled as if they were made out of sand. However, what seemed like the oldest part of town hadn't suffered all that much. Many of the ancient buildings stood strong, even if surrounded by water to their first floor.

What I was witnessing had to be the center of Neighborleans. Our loot had to be there, but I already saw a major problem to it. The city was sunken in that radiated, nasty, deadly, thick green water that flooded all the dome. We would need a boat, or some way to avoid getting our legs in the swamp.

I kept advancing down the crackled, leaf-covered road as I tried to figure out a way of getting to the flooded city center. I soon found myself dangerously close to the water, with my PipBuck clicking nervously, as it marked a rather worrisome +12 rads/second. I swiftly backed away from the radiated fluid, trying to look at the horizon with a safe distance. All the money in the world wasn't worth a deadly radiation poisoning.

Suddenly, I heard a loud laugh coming from behind me. A laugh I could identify almost everywhere. The crackling, loud laughter of a loudmouth, irreverent half-zebra.

"HAHAHA! Look at you, Farsight! Afraid of a little water?"

I turned around and saw Nadyr and Rose trotting carelessly towards me. I smiled as I saw them doing fine, and I scowled at the half-zebra's comment.

"I'm not afraid of the water, Nadyr. I'm afraid of the radiation."

"Well, that's something you already knew about. Don't go crying on me now."

"Fine. You're right. I shouldn't bicker about the radiation."

"Farsight, Nadyr, please calm down." Rose mediated.

I breathed deep to keep my tension at bay, while the nasty marsh air filled my lungs and made me wince. Nadyr smiled once again.

"The smell, right?" he said, winking.

"Yes. It will take some time until I get used to it."

"Don't worry. I have been through that already, even if I think that the smell in Peekayune wasn't so bad. I guess the dome will have something to do with it."

"Sure thing. By the way, where is Peekayune exactly?"

"Hm... More or less, like ten kilometers from here, to the northwest. It's outside of the dome and on the mainland. There's no way we're getting there."

"Right." I pointed the other way, towards the ruins coming out of the water. "Any plans on getting there, Nadyr?"

Nadyr gazed at the city center and mumbled something. The old buildings that stood strong looked very far away, and the rest of the newer constructions had been almost toppled. I was already thinking on a way of getting there by climbing and jumping through the ruins, but it was very risky. Besides, we needed a way of getting back with our saddlebags full, and I wasn't sure that we'd make the most agile lot. Maybe Nadyr would, but I would surely not.

“We could try to use the crumbled buildings to get there, but it would be very risky. A wrong step and you could be done for.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Shit. Then we’re in real trouble.” Nadyr grumbled.

“Are you giving up?”

“Aw, hell no. No. No. No. I ain’t giving up. I didn’t come all the way to turn around here.”

“Well, I don’t want to be a spoilsport, but I don’t see a way of getting there and back safely. And honestly, I don’t want to die in a radiated puddle.”

“Err, Farsight…” Rose whispered.

“So what? You want to return to your poor, miserable life in the desert? Fine by me!” Nadyr yelled.

“Nadyr…” Rose looked at the half-zebra.

“Fine by you? Oh, look at who is speaking. I don’t think your life was any better.” I smirked.

“Farsight, please!” Rose said.

“Well, at least I depend on myself!” Nadyr chuckled with irony.

“THAT’S ENOUGH!!!” Rose leapt and yelled. Nadyr and I bounced back, startled. “Are you two crazy or what? Is the swamp air rotting your brains? We have to work together to get this done! Otherwise, we’re going to return barehooved, and that in the best case scenario!”

“All right, Rose.” I nodded, feeling a bit ashamed. Nadyr grumbled.

“Now, listen to me for once, please. If this place was surrounded by lakes before the war, the ponies that lived here had to have boats. Boats that shouldn’t have been affected by a rise of the water level.”

“What about the megaspells?” Nadyr asked. “Those would affect them alright.”

“Meh. Look at the city center buildings. Still standing, even if flooded. I’d say that the zebras didn’t hit Neighorleans properly. They rather let it be flooded by radiated swamp water. Therefore, I’m pretty sure that we should find a boat somewhere. Now, let’s get moving, gentlecolts.”

Rose turned around and left us looking at each other, rather puzzled. That had been an enormous display of character and strength by our little Rose. I couldn’t help to crack a smile when I thought about it. Rose had leadership in her, she could actually be in charge.

“We should get going, Nadyr.”

“No doubt. She’s scary when she gets angry, bro.”

“I don’t think she’s really angry. When she’s really angry, her other half comes out.”

“You mean Lavender?”

“Yes.”

“Damn. Then I don’t want to see her angry. Let’s go.”

We caught up with Rose after a rather hasty gallop uphill. If my hunch was right, from the looks of things and the lack of buildings around us and around the teleporter shack, the hill island we were scouting had to have been a pre-War park. That gave us a vantage point to see the rest of the area, and that was what Rose had figured out already, since she was waiting for us on the top of the small knoll.

“Took you long enough.” She smiled.

“We’re sorry, Rose.” I sighed.

“Sorry for what?”

“For not having taken you seriously.”

“Oh, that. Apology accepted. Just do it a bit better next time, okay?”

“Sure.”

“Now that all’s clear, would you mind taking a look around?”

I did what Rose told me to do and turned around slowly, looking at the green horizon. Water and ruins were the common scenario in the Neighorleans dome, but when the compass pointed to the North, I saw something that stood out of the environment. A cluster of ruins came out of the water, but unlike the rest, it was connected by a series of catwalks made out of debris and sheet metal. Catwalks that had been crafted by ponies, what came to demonstrate that there was actual life inside the dome.

“That is...” I started.

“That is a settlement, indeed!” Rose smiled broadly.

“Great job, Rose. When did you find it?”

“Oh, not too long ago, really. I spotted it when I was waiting for you two to arrive.”

“I assume you suggest we go investigate the settlement.”

“Of course. If somepony knows how to get to Neighorleans, that will be whoever lives in those shacks.”

“Good. Let’s get moving, then.”

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After a long walk downhill, we made it to the beginning of the catwalks leading to the settlement. I looked up to the small village we were about to enter, and I had to acknowledge the adaptive abilities of ponykind. The settlement was built almost entirely on pylons and stilts, sprawling upward in an unstable balance. Most of the houses were made out of wood (which was abundant in the area) and sheet metal (which required a bit more of time to find and gather, but still was quite abundant), and even if they looked rusty and about to fall apart, they did conform a stable village.

There was no electric lighting, as it was obvious, but the place was lit by torches with eerie green flames. Those had to be the lights Nadyr had seen as a foal. They were rather unsettling, indeed, and they gave the place a rather obscure feel. However, these fires were the irrefutable proof of ponies living in the settlement.

“Err... What should we do?” Nadyr asked.

“I say we enter.” I answered. “Keep your guns concealed but ready. I don’t want to scare anypony, but we can’t discard the possibility of them being hostile.”

“Of course. They could be cannibals. It’s not that strange in the swamps.”

“Ca-cannibals?” Rose squeaked.

“Don’t worry, Rose. If they’re cannibals, we won’t let them have a bite.”

“All right...”

We walked forward on the catwalk, the sound of our hooves stepping on loose sheet metal resonating across the large green dome. So much for a silent entry. I visualized my rifle, hanging from my side, ready to be unholstered and fired if things got ugly. Suddenly, a figure stepped out of one of the few buildings that weren’t made out of sheet metal. In the middle of the settlement, the remains of a high-rise tower came out of the water like a spear futilely trying to pierce the leaf cover. However, only a couple of stages managed to grow higher than the catwalk level.

One of these stages had been modified to work as a ground level. One of the main windows had been turned into a main door, and that was where the figure was standing. Dimly lit by one of the torches, I managed to see that the fur of that pony had almost fallen apart, revealing a sickeningly white and bluish skin, full of gashes and scars. The mane was almost gone, just a few strands of blue remained as a witness of past times.

“Oh, visitors!” she yelled. Indeed, it was a she. A mare ghoul.

“Oh, hi.” I greeted.

“Don’t be shy, come closer!”

“Okay.”

We advanced towards the ghoul mare, looking around. More and more ghouls were coming out of the shacks, looking at us with evident surprise and a bit of eagerness. I tried to keep calm, but the sight of walking carcasses looking at us with interest was something that made me feel, to say the least, rather uncomfortable. Rose, on the other hoof, looked around amazed. I assumed she hadn’t seen a single ghoul in her life. Nadyr didn’t seem too impressed.

“Hello!” The ghoul mare shook hooves with all of us. I didn’t shake her hoof too strongly, since I sincerely feared to rip it off her leg. “My name is Auntie Cheval, welcome to our little settlement!”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Farsight, and these two are Desert Rose and Nadyr.”

“How are you?”

“Still a little shaken from our little trip, but fine, I guess.”

“Oh, you come from the teleporter!”

“Of course, where did you expect us to come from?”

“Ugh, me and my rotting brain.” She facehoofed. “Of course, you can’t come from anywhere else. Why don’t you come in and get comfortable?”

We nodded and walked into the old apartment building. The place had been conserved in a pre-war fashion, with fancy wooden furniture decorating the rooms, rugs on the wooden floor, and chandeliers providing the much needed light. The fire was, as in the outer torches, bright green. We all sat on a comfortable, large and profusely decorated red rug, while Auntie Cheval laid on a couch before us. We did look like fillies listening to a storyteller.

“So, now that we’re all comfortable, why don’t you tell me what brings you here?” she asked.

“Well, being totally honest, we’re scavengers.” I answered bluntly.

“Scavengers?”

“Yes, we came to explore the old city. Back where we live in, we work as traders, specialized in scavenged goods. The Wasteland is a nice source of this kind of items. However, we’re starting to run a bit low on supplies, and we learned about this city and how to get there.”

“I see. Well, I have nothing against that. Everypony has to make a living.”

“Thanks for your understanding.”

“Still, that hasn’t answered my question. What brings you to here?”

“To here? As in to this settlement?”

“Indeed.”

“Without wanting to be rude... Where are we exactly?”

“Oh, my head once again.” Cheval composed a lipless smile. Rather disturbing. “Welcome to Maretairie.”

“Maretairie?” Nadyr leapt out of his pseudo-lethargy. “Really? I thought it didn’t exist anymore!”

“You know Maretairie?” Cheval looked surprised.

“Of course I do!” Nadyr smiled. “I was raised in Peekayune! I know all the area, but I thought this place didn’t exist.”

“Really?” Cheval squeed. “What a coincidence! Good to see a fellow swamp-dweller every now and then.”

“Indeed. It’s great news.”

“Sorry to break the happy meeting, but we came here looking for something.” I got up to emphasize. “We need to find a way to get to Neighborleans. More properly, a boat.”

“A boat? Of course, I forgot that you smoothcoats can’t get into the water.”

“Yes, we can’t. Speaking of which, why have you built your town on stilts if water doesn’t bother you?”

“Well, to be totally honest with you, water does bother us. We don’t suffer from radiation. In fact, it heals us. Also, the local fauna doesn’t see us as prey, like it sees you. Who would like to eat rotting meat, anyway?”

“Yes... Err, no offence meant.”

“None taken. However, the water is cold and thick, which makes it pretty cumbersome for use to move in. So you can imagine it’s not the best setting to live in.”

“Fair enough. Now, about the boat...”

“Well, we don’t have any, but I guess some of my bucks could try to fetch one for you. There should be boats close to the remains of the Ponychartrain Yachting Club.”

“Thank you very much, Auntie Cheval. Can we offer you something in return? Like workforce, caps or something?”

“No, not needed. We are self-sufficient as we are. Still, I appreciate your kind offer.”

“No problem, it’s the least we could do.”

“Now, while you wait, why don’t you spend the night with us?”

“Of course. It will be our pleasure.” Damn, that had been a terrible lie.

I won’t lie to you. I don’t like ghouls. I find them to be an aberration, a freak of nature, product of the senselessness of ponykind. I thought about it for a long time when I met Mixer back at the Followers’ Fort, and, as charming and friendly he could be, he still was a rotting carcass. Back in Freedom Field, I saw Mixer as an oddity, as the sideshow freak of the Followers.

In Maretairie, however, things were fairly different. We were the oddity there. As sincere as Auntie Cheval’s welcome could be, I didn’t like finding myself surrounded by living timebombs. Mixer’s warning flashed in my mind like one of the New Pegasus neons. At any minute, under the relentless radiation of the swamp, any of the inhabitants of Maretairie could go feral. That would mean very bad news to us. However, if we wanted to get a boat, we would have to accept Cheval’s proposal.

“Great!” Cheval didn’t seem to notice my lie. “Samedi! Would you guide our guests to their rooms, please?”

Out of the blue, another ghoul had appeared in the room, without any of us noticing. I winced with surprise, while Nadyr greeted him (since it was a stallion) with a nod. Rose was looking awestruck by the locals. The newcomer was, as I said, a stallion, but unlike Auntie, this one was a zebra ghoul. White and black stripes were clearly visible in the patches of fur that hadn’t fallen off.

“Follow me, please.” He turned around and exited the building with us following him closely.

Nadyr caught up quickly and started talking with the zebra ghoul. It seemed that he had a certain interest of chatting with somepony of his own species, even if it was in a state of partial decomposition.

“So, your name was Samedi, wasn’t it?”

“Indeed. And you are?”

“Nadyr. Pleasure.”

“Fine. Are you from here?”

“Well, from the same swamp, but on the other side of the dome. Peekayune.”

“Peekayune, eh? I visited the town a long time ago, before the bombs fell. It was a nice place. Comfy.”

“Yeah. Comfy.” Nadyr smiled and looked to the dome. “It’s been so long since I left...”

“Things don’t change much in the swamp. You won’t have missed much.”

“I guess...” Nadyr looked down. I couldn’t see him clearly, but I had the feeling he was holding back the tears. Even a tough-as-nails killer gets homesick every now and then.

Samedi took us to a small group of shacks that stood on the far end of the village. At a first glance, I had thought they had to be lavatories of some sort, or storage closets at most. They were small and frail, and were almost at water level.

“These are your shacks.” Samedi pointed at them without much enthusiasm.

“They don’t look too... stable.” Rose muttered.

“They’re a bit torn apart. Sorry about that.” Samedi shrugged. The expression was more of a social convention than a real apology. “They used to belong to some bucks that ended up going feral. After that, well, we emptied the shacks and left them as they were. Time did the rest.”

“Oh well, if it’s for a night...” Nadyr smiled. “I’m going to have a little shuteye now. The teleporter has left me really worn out.”

Nadyr picked the first shack, which was the one in best state, and darted inside. Soon, we could all hear him snoring. Good old Nadyr had a great ability to disconnect from the surrounding reality when it came to getting some sleep.

“Now that we speak about it...” Rose yawned adorably. “I need to rest a bit as well. Excuse me.”

Rose walked into the second shack, looking rather tired. By the time I noticed, I was standing alone on the catwalk, looking at Samedi face to face.

“Aren’t you tired as well?” he asked.

“Not that much. I blacked out when we teleported, so I took a little nap. I guess that’s the difference.”

“So it seems.” Samedi shrugged again.

Silence fell between us and the sound of crickets and rad-frogs filled the air. I didn’t feel like going into the shack, but Samedi wasn’t leaving either. Instead, he looked at me with a rather concentrated face, as if he was trying to read my mind.

“Excuse me...” he started. “Farsight, was it?”

“Yes.”

“I think I heard you say you want to go to Neighorleans?”

“Yes. That is our goal.”

“Have you heard about the Curse?”

“The Curse? Oh, yes, I remember Nadyr mentioning something about it. Still, I only know that there is supposed to be a Curse, nothing else.”

“Then you know nothing. There IS a Curse in Neighorleans. You should beware its power.”

“Interesting. Would you tell me a bit more about it?”

“It all happened some months before the megaspells fell. Neighorleans was getting ready for its yearly celebration, Mardi Gras, when something happened. Something bad, really bad.”

“What happened, exactly?”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t there. That very day, I had gone to Peekayune to visit an old friend. We were going to listen to the Mardi Gras Midnight Parade in the radio, but about an hour before midnight, the radio went silent. Not only ours, but all of them. Everything had gone crashing down.”

“What did you do, then?”

“My friend and I decided to go to Neighorleans, to learn about what had happened. Many of the inhabitants of Peekayune were getting ready to form a scouting party, but we were faster and left before they even got started. Luckily for them, to be honest. We galloped down the road in the dark, praying for the best but expecting the worst. We were at war, and I was afraid that my kin had launched a massive attack on the city.”

“Oh, by the way, sorry for interrupting. Didn’t you get harassed for being a zebra in wartime?”

“Lots of times, but in the end, the Ministry of Morale goons knew who me and my family were. We had been living in Neighorleans for generations, a long time before zebras and ponies became enemies. Others weren’t so lucky, I’m afraid.”

“That’s shameful.”

“Indeed, it is. But we’re digressing. As I told you, my friend and I got to Neighorleans as fast as we could. Upon arriving, we noticed a dark energy surrounding the city. Some kind of necromantic spell had been cast. My grandmother, the sun and moon guard her soul, taught me to identify and defend against necromancy. I warned my friend, but he insisted on going deeper. We could have turned around and warned the neighboring towns about what had happened, but we didn’t. We should have left Neighorleans as fast as possible.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Indeed, we didn’t. We walked down the streets of the once busy city, now totally silent. I swear I have never felt as much fear as the one I felt then. Everything was silent, dead silent. As we advanced toward the center of town, the dark forces acting in town became stronger and stronger, but my friend wouldn’t back down. Soon, we got to the old town, where the Parade was taking place, and we witnessed the most abhorrent thing we would ever see.”

“What was that thing?” Samedi’s tale had me absorbed.

“Everypony was there, looking at the parade, but nopony moved. It looked like time had frozen solid for everypony but my friend and me. When we got close to the mass of ponies, we saw their faces... I still see those faces in my nightmares. They were locked in wails of pain and horror, their eyes gazing into infinity, about to come out of their skulls. Their muzzles were opened wide in all sorts of screams and rictuses of fear. Something terribly wrong had happened.”

“Were they dead?”

“No, they weren’t. They were warm, and I could feel their heartbeat when I checked. Something had turned them into... whatever they had become. I call them ‘husks’. I was close to panicking, and then my friend started hearing the voices. He started talking to the husks, as if they were alive. Then he started talking about a party. I tried to talk to him, but he didn’t seem to notice me. I tried to pull him out of town, but there was no way of making him notice me. Before I could do anything, he galloped forward down the avenue, and soon I had lost him. I looked for him all around town, and then I heard him scream. It was a blood-chilling cry, as if his soul was being ripped out of him. By the time I got to him, he had turned into another husk.”

“That is horrible...” I felt a chill down my spine. I had already fought dark forces before, and I ended up with a bullet in my knee and a psycho hiding in Rose’s body.

“Indeed, it was horrible. I galloped as quickly as possible and returned to Peekayune to warn the population. Soon, we spread the word about the Curse. Then, the megaspells fell and Neighorleans was flooded. The husks were destroyed and the place was forsaken, but the Curse remains.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“Never mind. I’ve lived with this burden for more than two hundred years, and there are many more to come. Samedi sighed and turned around, leaving me sunken in a sea of doubt, worries and curiosity.

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I walked around for a while, talking to the locals while trying to hide my disgust towards them. I wanted to learn about Maretairie, about how things went down in the small settlement. I soon came to the convincement

that the ponies in Margetairie formed a tribe. They didn't have all the tribal paraphernalia, such as rituals or idols to the stars or the sun; but they did behave like a tribe. Auntie Cheval was a sort of Elder to the ghouls, a spiritual and terrenal leader. They didn't have any kind of economy, since they could manage without having to resort to trading. The population was so small, that all the needs were covered in a self-serviced fashion. Some ponies hunted, some cooked, some took care of the maintenance.

We had a quick meal with Auntie Cheval at night, before going to sleep. We were offered what seemed to be a rad-snake stew that tasted like everything in that swamp, damp and mushy. The chat was the usual one between newly-mets, that is, pointless chit-chat about the weather and the difference between our and their slice of Wasteland. Rose had seemed to grow fond of Auntie Cheval, as she looked at her with starry eyes. I could understand her, since Auntie resembled the mother or grandmother we all missed. I couldn't forget the fact that she was a rotting carcass, though.

After our meal, we returned to our quarters to try and get some sleep. Soon after lying in the mattress that would act as my bed, the thoughts about what Samedi had told me started coming out and keeping me awake. Nadyr was asleep already, as almost the whole swamp could hear, and I guessed Rose was too. I, on the other hoof, was wide awake. For some hours, I laid on my bed trying to get some rest, but I failed miserably, so I decided to go out for another walk, hoping that the night air would help me get ready for a shutdown.

I felt amazed when I opened the shack door. Everypony was acting normally, as if it wasn't the middle of the night. The green torches lit the shacks and ruined buildings with their eerie light, and the ghouls walked and worked as if it was noon. Close to the entrance catwalk, I saw the promised boat. It was a small vessel, fitted with a small off-board engine, that would take the three of us safely into the city center, and with a pinch of luck, it would bring us back with our loot.

Since everypony around was acting normally, I decided to go pay Auntie Cheval a little visit. After all, if somepony could give me information regarding the place we were about to visit, that was her. Besides, I wanted to know if the boat was ready, since I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

Cheval was sitting on the old couch where she had sat before. It seemed that her only purpose in the tribe was to give advice and sit down. When I came through the door, she lifted her decomposing head and smiled. I had to refrain from shaking.

"Ah, Farsight. What brings you here? Shouldn't you be sleeping?" she asked kindly.

"I couldn't sleep, so I decided to go out for a walk. But then I saw all of you acting normally, which puzzled me quite a lot, so I decided to come to you for some answers."

"Before you ask anything, it's because of our condition."

"Beg your pardon?"

"Our ghoul condition. We don't need to eat, drink, sleep or breathe."

"But then, why do you hunt and cook?"

"It's just a reminder of our past lives. After all, we all will end up going feral. However, we don't want to sit down and wait for that to happen, so we try to act as normal ponies. We respect daytime, we hunt, eat, drink and so on. It may be useless, but it gives us peace."

"I understand that."

"Still, you don't like us. Don't worry, it's understandable."

"But..." I had been unable to hide my disgust, judging from her remark.

"I told you, don't worry. I understand that. We're the first ghouls you've seen, aren't we?"

"No, you're not. I came across one before."

"And knowing him, you still hate us."

I had a choice lying before me. I could either act politely and try to come out of the situation by means of a political answer, that is, saying a lot of words with little meaning; or I could be totally honest, as harmful as it

could be. For some reason, I chose the second option.

“Indeed, I do. You’re aberrations, living reminders of the mistake our race committed more than two centuries ago. Not only that, but you’re miscalculations. You were supposed to die with the megaspells, and yet you live. Rotting and close to destruction, but you endure to live. Your very existence is a mistake.”

“And you don’t like mistakes, do you?”

“Of course not. I like it when plans come out right.”

The air between us seemed to freeze as an uncomfortable, tense silence filled the room. Auntie Cheval and I stared at each other, trying to read each other’s minds, or challenging ourselves to maintain eye contact. Her expression, as much as her aberrant face let me know, was stern and cold; whereas mine had to be one of pure defiance. Then, she let go a slight sigh and closed her eyes.

“At least, you’re being honest.”

“Why would I lie to you by saying this?”

“Indeed.”

“Anyhow, we will leave soon, and I don’t think we’ll be coming back again. You will forget us and you will forget my lack of finesse.”

“Lack of finesse?” Cheval laughed. “You’re worried about your lack of finesse? Seriously, Farsight, you are surprising.”

“You’ll have to explain that to me.”

Cheval sighed, and her expression became sad and moody. She made herself comfortable in the couch once again, and looking to the floor, started talking. Somehow, I had the feeling that she was sunken deep in her memories.

“You know, Farsight, there was a time where I would have said the same thing that you are saying. In fact, there was a time in which I abhorred ghouls. That is, until I became one of them. You can’t even imagine what we all have been through. I am two hundred and seventy-five years old, Farsight. I’ve seen my share of the world, both before and after the War. You’ve seen Maretairie now. A bunch of ruined shacks, about to fall into the water. I remember the Maretairie from before the War... It wasn’t a dirty village, but it was a distinguished suburb. Classy houses with their yards and their pools, the park of Harmony Hill, where the teleporter was built... Then, the Curse came to happen, and later, the Flood.”

“The Flood? You mean the Megaspells?”

“I mean the Flood, Farsight. Things weren’t as black or white as you might think.”

“What happened to the city, Auntie?”

“You know about the Curse?”

“Samedi told me about it.”

“Ah, Samedi. Poor fellow. He’s forced to bear the burden of the Curse for all eternity. What he saw cannot be unseen, and he won’t find the solace of death anytime soon.”

“Does that worry you?”

“Of course it does, Farsight. Imagine our life, or our un-life, if you prefer. For more than two centuries, we haven’t had to sleep, eat, drink or breathe. Not only that, but we have become virtually immortal. Our only fate is slowly descending into insanity, just to keep roaming the swamp until something finds us worthy of its stomach. We force ourselves to maintain some rituals from times past, just to delay that degradation of our minds, since our mind and our self-awareness is what keeps us from becoming wild beasts like the ones lurking below the dark waters. We don’t pray for prosperity or happiness. We pray for our death to come swiftly.”

Cheval sighed.

“We broke the laws of Nature. Ponykind played Goddess, and this was our punishment. If Nature had been respected, I would have died of old age, in my bed and surrounded by my beloved ones. If it was for Nature, you and I should never had met. But we believed we could outsmart Nature. We believed we could bend its laws to our purpose. We meddled with Physics, Chemistry, Magic, Arcano-technology... What did we obtain in the end? A Wasteland. Death, suffering, hatred. But for us, for Nature’s greatest mistakes, there was another punishment, much worse than death. It was the punishment of life.”

I breathed deep while thinking about Cheval’s words. I could feel the sorrow in them, the boredom of a forsaken life in the middle of a prison of wilderness, with no hopes of getting out, healing or even dying. When the only possible outcome is insanity, hope is banished.

“I see. Still, you didn’t tell me about what happened to the city.”

“Oh, sorry, sometimes I get carried away. You know about the Curse, so I won’t tell you much more about it. Since the Curse took place, the population of the suburbs started leaving the area, scared of the horrors of Neighorleans. Some said that one could hear the blood-chilling screams of the cursed at midnight, some said that the buildings lit up at night and eldritch shadows could be seen. Of course, all of them were rumours with no fundament, but nopony dared to enter the lost city.”

“Then the zebra nation attacked.”

“Indeed. Some months later, reports of attacks started ringing in the radio. The zebra nation had deployed missiles armed with balefire bombs, they said. One day, the radio went silent. The next day, shortly before dawn, we heard and felt the world tremble. Some of us climbed to Harmony Hill to see what was going on, and that was what saved us. Two massive tidal waves hit Neighorleans from North and South. They swallowed the city, wrecking buildings and killing thousands of innocent ponies. When the waves cleared, Neighorleans was sunken. We all wept when we saw our homes underwater. Then, other problems came. Radiation, wild beasts, diseases... However, we endured. We survived, and we changed. We mutated and we become the living horrors that we are now.”

“I see. I only have one question. Why didn’t the zebras destroy Neighorleans? After all, the tidal waves did kill a lot of ponies, but the core of the city remains rather intact.”

“You know, I always thought it wasn’t the zebras who attacked Neighorleans. I think this was the Equestrian Government’s doing.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Before the War, Neighorleans was surrounded by water, and protected by a series of levees, in order to avoid problem created by high tides. After all, Lake Ponychartrain is connected to the sea. Well, I think the attacks were directed to those levees instead of being headed for the city. When all the levees broke, the water rushed into town, sinking everything in the process. They wanted to flood the city so nopony could enter, but they wanted to preserve it unharmed.”

“Are you implying that the Ministries had something to do with the Curse?”

“I’m just adding two plus two here, Farsight. I’ve had over two centuries to think about it. One day, the city goes silent. The next, the levees are attacked and the city floods. Some years later, the trees grow and close the dome around Neighorleans. Everything is too tailored, too perfect. I don’t think this is a matter of chance.”

“All right, Auntie Cheval. Thanks for sharing all this with me. However, I need to ask for forgiveness once again.”

“For what?”

“For my terrible manners, of course. You have welcomed us to stay with you, and we have been really rude. I must say I’m sorry. The Wasteland turns everypony into savages.”

“You’re right, young one. Still, there is no offence taken. I can understand your disgust towards ghouls.”

“Well... In that case, with all said, we will be leaving.”

“Farewell, and good luck.”

I turned around and left Auntie in her couch. I was fighting with my feelings, as the thing I really wanted to do was to take all the rotting carcasses out. However, that was not wise, at least not for the moment. There was a non-neglectable chance of having to need their help while in the swamp, and then there was Rose, who would surely not see it as a good decision.

“Farsight, before you leave...” Auntie called.

“Yes?” I said, without turning my head.

“I am thinking that you should know a bit more about us. Your hatred and disgust is mostly based on ignorance, and I can’t blame you for that. However, what I can do is give you the means to fight that ignorance. From there on, it will be your responsibility to decide whether you want to open your mind or not.”

What she said was fairly reasonable, I had to admit it. However, my disgust towards ghouls wasn’t fundamented on ignorance, but on a totally reasoned basis. Still, in order to be a polite guest, I decided to accept her offering.

“All right, Auntie. Tell me.”

“No, it’s not something I will tell you now. Your companions want to leave, don’t they?”

“I guess they do. What is it, then?”

“It’s a little holotape I listen to every now and then to remind myself of what I was and what I did. It will help you understand me better, and in consequence, the rest of the inhabitants of Maretairie.”

I noticed that she said what I was instead of who I was. Auntie had, in a way, denied she was an actual pony. She was something different now.

“All right, I’ll take it.”

Auntie picked the tape from a pouch lying by her side and threw it across the room. I lifted it with my magic before it hit the ground. The tape was old and the nickel coating of the case was almost worn out from the many times it had been used. I put it into my saddlebag and looked at Auntie for the last time.

“Then, goodbye, Auntie.”

“Goodbye, Farsight, and good luck.”

I left the room without looking at the ghoul. I really wanted to leave fast, or I’d do something irreversible.

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Rose and Nadyr were waiting for me on the pier, next to the boat. I jumped into the small vessel, which rocked dangerously in the thick swamp water. My companions looked at me in silence, while I took a seat and started looking at the engine. It was a magic-powered arcano-engine, meant to be powered by a gemstone, or in case there was no gemstone, a unicorn could use his energy to start the propeller. I concentrated on the engine, focusing my magic on the starter circuit. My horn glowed with a faint blue aura and the propeller coughed and started spinning.

Rose looked at me with a smile on her face, while Nadyr was more concentrated on our surroundings. I was trying to steer the boat through the forest of pillars and ruins that emerged from the water and the ones that didn’t. These last ones were clearly the most dangerous ones, since they could wreck our boat without us even noticing it. None of us said a single word, and the only sound we could hear was the constant humming of the boat engine.

“How did it go?” Nadyr asked.

“Well, it went.”

“You don’t seem too happy.”

“I’m not. I had to fight the wish to start shooting everypony there.”

“I guess you would have your reasons, bro.” Nadyr whispered.

“I do, Nadyr.” I shrugged. “I don’t like ghouls. I really don’t like them. They are living abominations.”

“So what? Are you going to slay them all?”

“No. Just these ones.”

“Why?”

“Well, while you two were sleeping, I spoke to some of the locals, namely Samedi and Auntie Cheval. Did you feel they were happy?”

“Happy?”

“Yes, happy with their lives.”

“Aw, hell no. They were bored, even disgusted, I’d say. Not happy at all.”

“Exactly. From what I spoke with them, their existence had become a burden to them. Having to live day after day in a prison, with no hope of anything but becoming a feral monster had to be a terrible feeling. I just assume that they won’t bicker much about me giving them eternal rest.”

“Well, if that is what they said... I remember having met many ghouls as a foal, and I wouldn’t say they looked sad or suicidal, but they weren’t locked in a cursed city. However, have you thought on how Rose will take it?”

“Do you honestly think she would accept it?”

“All right, you’ve got your point. She won’t buy it.”

Nadyr and I looked at each other in silence. I could kill the Maretairie ghouls and Nadyr would understand it, but Rose would surely see that choice with disgust. I would have to make a choice. I could either be true to my principles and damage my relationship with Rose forever, or I could lie to myself in order to preserve Rose’s respect towards me. Either way, I lost.

“You know...” Rose said suddenly. “I’ve been thinking about the ghouls.”

“What is it?” I asked. It was quite a coincidence indeed.

“I admire their resistance. They’ve survived for more than two hundred years in their state, and still they endure, day after day...”

“Yes. What about it?”

“They did remind me of myself. Me and my other half... Lavender. About how I’m forced to live with the constant threat of turning into something I totally abhor.”

“Just as the ghouls have the danger of going feral. What is your point then, Rose?”

“Well, if they could survive two centuries, I guess I can take a lifetime.”

I sighed. For a moment, I was starting to fear she might go suicidal and angsty. The analogy she did between the ghouls and herself was legit, although I didn’t think it was the same process. Ghouls would end up going feral by action of the radiation-induced decay of their brains. It was an inevitable process, and it was only a matter of time. Rose’s case, on the other hoof, was different. There were two personalities living in her brain, and every day was a struggle to keep Lavender at bay, but Rose had all the means to succeed in such endeavour. If there was a pony capable of doing so, that was Desert Rose.

“Well, speaking of ghouls and survival, Auntie Cheval asked me to listen to this holotape.” I pulled the tape out of the saddlebag. “Apparently, it will help us understand them better. I suppose we should take our time to listen to it.”

“Go ahead.” Nadyr nodded.

“Yes, I agree with you.” Rose smiled.

I stopped the engine and jacked the holotape into my PipBuck. In the middle of the silence of the swamp dome, Auntie’s voice started booming, about to reveal us the truth about Neighborleans, Maretairie and herself...

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Note: Perk added.

Swamp Newcomer: You’ve come across a totally different environment, and you’re still in the process of adapting to it. -5% to all abilities until this perk is substituted by the “Swamp Dweller” perk.

## Chapter 10: Self Control

*“Is this on? Good, in that case I’ll start. My name is Bayou Cheval Leblanc, although everypony here calls me Auntie. Actually, I don’t think my name is of any importance here, since my name is well known to the only ones that will be able to hear this log after I have... well, after I have become a monster like the ones we fear so much.*

*I’ve had a long life, which has given me the opportunity to think long about what happened to our world and about what drove us into this madness, and what worries me the most is that I haven’t been able to find a convincing answer. Everything has gone so wrong that I fear that all the good in this world has vanished.*

*As I am recording this, I am watching myself in the mirror. I used to be a pretty mare a long ago. Even some years before the Flood took place, being elderly as I was, I still retained a bit of elegance and class; but now I can’t recognize myself. My mane is falling apart, my coat has started to become frail and dim, and my teeth are rotting from the inside out.*

*It’s not a new phenomenon to me. I’ve seen many of my friends and neighbors succumb to the multiple threats of radiation: all kinds of disease, fever, mutation, madness, and finally this. We are turning into something that reminds me of the old horror movies, those undead monsters that ate the ponies’ brains. Will we end up like that?*

*I suppose this is justice. Karma, equality, universal balance, call it what you want; but I think we deserved it. When I was young, things were different. We weren’t so proud, so arrogant. We welcomed the different, we valued sharing and caring. Now we kill each other because of the stripes or the flat coat.*

*When the Flood came, we celebrated our survival. We cheered and sung, because the tidal waves of death had spared us; but then we faced the hard truth. We had to start from scratch, having to live in an environment that had suddenly become alien and hostile; and having to rebuild our homes, which had been swallowed by the water. Since then, every day has become a struggle for survival.*

*And I ask myself, what for? The city is dead, our families and neighbors are dead, and the few that survived are turning into something we don’t want to become. I am starting to think that our punishment is having to endure in this world. Many days I get out of bed after a sleepless night, wishing the tidal wave had taken me as well. I just want to find peace and rest my weary bones, and I am quite sure that many of us think the same. Until then, we have no other choice than to carry on. Auntie out.”*

With a subtle click, the recording ended.

I found myself looking blankly into an unknown point in the middle of the green dome above us, meditating about the words of Auntie. I still thought that she and her neighbors were nothing else than freaks of nature, walking abominations out of the laws of logic; disgusting creatures that had no point on existing. However, this recording had shown me there was, or had been, a pony behind the eldritch beast she had turned into.

The recording conveyed such sadness, such sorrow, that I felt my heart squirm. Her voice showed how much she had lost in the War, starting with the world she knew and ending up with her ponykind. I still planned to take them out, but it wasn’t out of hatred... it was out of mercy. She was asking for it, wanting to find peace in the only way she would find it in her condition. No pony deserved to turn into a feral, blabbering beast.

It seemed that all of us had been touched to some point by the story of Auntie’s life. Nadyr looked to the ruins among us with an absent expression, while Rose was looking at her hooves with a worried face.

“It must have been so hard...” Rose muttered.

“I agree. But you already know life is hard, don’t you, Rose?” I asked gently. “You’ve been through your share of sorrow and suffering as well.”

“Yes, but I don’t think it’s nearly comparable to what they had to endure.”

“Everypony’s life is difficult in the Wastelands, Rose. I don’t see the point in comparing. If your intention is to feel bad because your life has been easier, go ahead, but don’t expect me to follow you.”

“Farsight’s right, missy.” Nadyr spoke with evident disdain in his voice. “Don’t compare yourself with anypony. Each one of us has a story, and none of them are happy ones. The Wasteland makes us all equal, more or less.”

“Equally disgraceful.” I added.

“Exactly. Now, if you don’t mind, how about we get moving? I’m starting to grow roots here!” Nadyr grumbled.

“All right, all right. Let’s go.”

I focused on the engine and my horn glowed dimly with a blue aura. The engine stuttered and started buzzing and vibrating. Soon, the small boat was moving at a light pace, surrounding the large island that was Harmony Hill. The vessel was a small craft, nimble and easy to handle; but it was also frail. I had to move rather slowly to avoid hitting any of the many obstacles that came out of the water.

The outskirts of Neighorleans were a flooded labyrinth of crumbled pillars and twisted beams, a true ordeal to cross safely. Even if the center of the sunken city was so close that we could almost touch it with our hooves, the path to get there was slow and tortuous. We had to drive the boat through narrow passages and across stretches of shallow waters, where a wrong move could leave us shipwrecked.

That wasn’t the only thing that worried me about the swamp. We all had grown used to the constant clicking sound of my PipBuck, but the truth was that the radiation was there, slowly undermining our health. Time was of the essence. Besides, there was something else, something that moved underwater, and that was definitely following us.

I tried not to think about whatever lurked beneath us, but according to Nadyr’s description of the local fauna, it would either burn us, poison us or eat us alive in a matter of seconds. It was a rather unpleasant perspective. However, there was fairly little we could do. I am a good shooter, rather good actually; but I can’t expect to hunt down an enemy I can’t see. In fact, I was wondering if it was my imagination tricking me.

“Nadyr...” I said.

“Yes, I’ve seen it. Keep moving and get us out of this labyrinth.”

“What is following us?”

“Are.”

“Are?”

“As in ‘they are’; we’re being followed by a swarm of them.” Nadyr was starting to sweat. I had never seen him that nervous.

“A swarm of what?” Rose asked, worried.

“Just get us out! I’ll explain later! MOVE!”

I put the boat engine on full power and the small vessel darted forward. The world curled into a tunnel of concrete walls and water floor as the boat navigated through the ruins at full speed. My senses concentrated on guiding the boat out of the labyrinth and away of our unseen enemy. Nadyr screamed ‘left’ or ‘right’ every now and then, trying to help me anticipate the coming turns, while Rose had crouched and formed a shaking ball in the middle of the boat.

The walls seemed to be closer minute by minute, as it appeared that we had chosen the narrowest way out of the maze of crumbled buildings. I had the feeling that it was only a matter of time that we crashed the boat, as I was having more and more trouble keeping it away from the towering ruins around us.

“Nadyr!” I yelled above the whizzing noise of air at high speed. “Are you sure this is the way out?”

“What is wrong?”

“This is narrow as fuck, Nadyr! I can’t keep the boat away from the walls!”

“Damn, Farsight! We’re almost out of this one! Keep it up for a sec!”

“That’s what I am trying, Nadyr, but I just can’t keep it straight anymore!”

“LOOK OUT!!!” Rose yelled suddenly.

I managed to get a glimpse of what Rose had warned us about. We were heading straight for a wall at full speed! I tried to steer the boat away, but we were too close, moving too fast. Impact was inevitable, so I ducked and prayed for a quick death. They say your life flashes before your eyes in these situations, but I can prove you wrong. The only thing I saw was a green wall coming closer and closer...

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“You all OK?” Nadyr asked.

“Just a bit shaken, that is all.” I replied.

“I’m fine.” Rose nodded.

We had been lucky, as lucky as one could be in these cases. The wall we had crashed into was made out of wood instead of concrete or bricks. Therefore, the boat had just punched a big hole through it and we had made it rather unharmed. At the moment, we and the boat were standing on a crackled wooden floor, trying to catch our breath after the rush of adrenaline we had been through.

Apparently, we had broken into the remains of a ruined apartment building, as the room we had landed in was decorated with a king size bed and some drawers. The far end of the building had crumbled as well, and we could see the rest of the swamp from our position. We would only have to drag the boat across the room and to the other shore, so to speak.

“Everypony stay on the boat.” Nadyr warned.

“Why? We’re not on water.” I replied.

“Oh, and what is that thin layer of fluid on the floor? In my hood, that’s called water.”

“Yes, but the water isn’t deep enough for the boat to make it through. We need to drag it forward.”

“They’re still behind us. We can’t risk it.”

“Risk it? Do you hear this annoying click, Nadyr?” I pointed at my PipBuck. “This is radiation, which is ALREADY killing us! We need to spend the least time possible in Neighorleans, and this means we’re going to have to get the boat back on deep water.”

“But we will alert them if we get on the water!”

“Nadyr, how do they know we’re here?” Rose asked. “Since the water is so thick and dark, I doubt they can actually see at a long range.”

That was smart. Very smart. Very well thought.

“Well, I have the hunch that they can feel the vibration on the water surface, or they have some sort of sonar...”

“In any case, I am much lighter than you two. Maybe they won’t notice me.”

“It’s the best option, I reckon. Well, the least bad one, but you won’t be able to drag the boat with the two of us on it.” I said.

“Hm... I’ll go check the drawers. Maybe I can find something heavy enough to create a good distraction, so we can move the boat.”

With a skip and a hop, Rose jumped out of the boat and quickly walked on the shallow layer of water that barely wetted the wooden floor of the room. Her target were the old drawers in one of the corners. Suddenly,

the sound of rustling water filled the air.

“What the hell is that sound?”

“I am afraid that Rose’s plan has failed.” Nadyr grunted. “Cock your guns, Farsight. We’re going to have to use them.”

I pulled out my rifle and checked the magazine. Loaded and ready to fire, as I always took care to have. Nadyr unholstered his revolver and checked the ammunition, then he closed the barrel and grabbed the hilt in his mouth.

“Farsight? Nadyr?” Rose asked, worried about our reaction. “What is going on?”

“Get back on the boat, Rose.” Nadyr’s voice sounded stern and dark. “Don’t waste a single second.”

“Why?”

“Get to high ground, Rose. Something is coming.”

Right when I issued the warning, a blast of water filled the room, as if another tidal wave had hit us from behind; and a swarm of little, horrid creatures surrounded Rose. Their appearance was eldritch, like out of a deranged mind’s nightmare: imagine a purple and green lizard as tall as your knees, add the fact that it has six heads with six mouths and lots of sharp teeth; and you’ll have the picture of the creatures that had been following us all the way to this showdown.

“What are these things?” Rose yelled, scared stiff. Nadyr dropped the gun from his mouth.

“They’re called scyllids, missy, and if you want to get out alive, you’d better climb to that bed!” Nadyr pointed at the old, mushy mattress.

Rose leapt aside to get over the seven or eight lizards surrounding her, but she tripped and fell to the floor. The swarm of scyllids opened and closed their maws in a macabre display of eagerness for pony meat.

“ROSE!” I yelled and drew my rifle. There was a high chance of hitting the filly, but something had to be done swiftly, or the lizards would eat her alive.

“Watch out, Farsight, you might hit her if you miss.” Nadyr warned me.

“I know...” I sighed in despair. “Rose! Don’t worry, I’m getting you out of there!”

I activated S.A.T.S. with the hope of seeing clearly where Rose was, in order to avoid hitting her. Suddenly, the overflow of marked contours made me blink twice. It was a damn swarm alright. Luckily for me, the green contour of Desert Rose shone clearly over the mass of small red shapes. I just had to aim my hollow rounds to those bastards far enough from Rose. That, and hope for the best, since I didn’t know what would happen after I fired my rifle. What I did know for certain, though, was that if I lost too much time Rose would be done for, so I breathed deep, rose my second prayer of the hour, and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

A couple of scyllids burst into a cloud of crimson ichor as the hollow round broke into a myriad of metal shreds upon impact. The sound of their brethren’s death cries and the smell of their freshly spilled blood, as well as the echoing roar of my rifle distracted the purple and green predators from nomming Rose, who managed to get back up on her hooves and stagger towards the bed. She had been bitten in many places, and she even carried one or two heads of a stray scyllid hanging from one of her legs. Blood caked her coat, and her cloak had been torn to shreds.

With Rose standing above the group of pests, it was easier to take them down, and Nadyr joined the fray. With his revolver tightly held in her mouth, he aimed at the mass of lizards that regrouped on the floor. This time, they were heading for me, as they reckoned I was their biggest threat at the moment. Those bastards were smart, I had to admit that.

**BLAM!**

My rifle roared once again, and the group of wild purple creatures was heavily maimed by the blast.

However, instead of making the rest back off, the ruthless massacre of their kin made them charge with greater anger at us.

“These bastards won’t give up!” I yelled.

“AIM LOW!” Nadyr barked. “FORGET THE HEADS!”

Forget the heads, right. Taking into account that the lizards had six of them, forgetting about the almost hypnotic movement of the scyllids’ heads was no easy task. However, I had been successful in shooting them down with my hollow rounds.

**BLAM!**

The shot went a bit high and it cut two heads of the nearest lizard cleanly off its body. The other four heads looked at the wound for an instant, and then hissed at me in anger. Even if there were only a few of them, they had us actually cornered in the boat.

**BLAM!**

I missed. The four-headed scyllid looked at me and croaked in something that resembled a laugh. Even the local fauna made fun of our lack of adaptation.

“No! It hurts!” Rose was crying on the bed, bleeding profusely from a wound on the lower neck. One of the lizards had been able to grasp her body and was starting to have meal, courtesy of the filly.

“Nadyr! Lizard on the bed, with Rose!”

“GOT IT!”

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

Three shots in a quick volley cut the most of the necks of the scyllid that was trying to nom Rose, and the little predator fell to the mattress, convulsing in pain. Rose wailed in suffering, making me consume myself in anguish. I needed to help her, but the remaining reptiles had us pinned in the vessel. Sticking my hoof out would turn me into prey.

“Farsight! Two together, one o’clock!” Nadyr roared. Indeed, two lizards were very close to each other.

**BLAM!**

The hollow round of my rifle turned the two scyllids into purple goo. I let go a small grumble of satisfaction as I saw the remaining predators flinch at the roar of my rifle. Just two to go now, one of them being the one with four heads.

“Take the left!” Nadyr roared.

That meant I was going to face my scaled nemesis, the one that had mocked me before. Nadyr had centered his crosshairs on the remaining scyllid, and gave me a commanding look. Fire when ready.

**BLAM! BANG!**

Two roars at the same time, two bullets hurled at full speed, two mutated creatures leaving this world. We were finally free of those dangerous inhabitants of the swamp.

“Is it over?” I grumbled.

“For now...” Nadyr sighed. “We’ve only taken out a pack of them, but there are many more hiding in the swamp. It’s only a matter of time until other scyllids find us.”

“In that case, I think the best will be to get moving.”

“I agree. What happened to Rose?”

“She is lying on the bed right now... I suppose she has passed out. Start moving the boat, I am going to check on her.”

“Hey, why don’t you move the boat and I go check on Rose?”

“You said earlier that you were the muscle and I was the brain of this group, right? Well, use that muscle and find us a way out! I’ll use my brain and my magic to heal Rose.” I smiled smugly.

“Ugh. Me and my big muzzle.” Nadyr facehoofed and jumped out of the boat. I leapt out as well and galloped to the bed, where Rose had eventually blacked out.

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Rose looked rather bad, with her camouflage cloak torn to shreds by the attack of the mutant lizards, and with her small body full of bleeding bite wounds. Some of them had started clogging already, but some others had torn flesh and fur apart and needed to be taken care of. Ironies of destiny, the healer of our party was the one in need of medical aid.

I had no actual knowledge on medicine or magical healing, so I felt totally out of place while looking at the wounded filly. With my heart beating faster each second, I tried to think calmly and decide what to do with her. She was unconscious but breathing, which was a good place to start; but some of the wounds looked rather nasty, and the blood was already starting to form a small pool of crimson on the mattress.

I looked at Rose’s saddlebag, which had been gnawed by the scyllids without much success. Rose was the one carrying the few medical supplies we could muster, so if there was something I could use to heal her, it would be stored in there.

“Let’s see...” I said, almost stuttering. “Bandages... check. Painkillers... check. Needle and thread? Oh, I guess that’s for sewing cuts together. Sleep pills... Who takes sleep pills? Rose?”

I picked a couple of bandage rolls and started spreading them out clumsily. I had the feeling of being doing something wrong, and that sensation made me doubt before taking any step. Once again, that was like a hammer to my head. I started panicking once again. I had no idea about what to do. I had no healing skills. But I had to do something... Or Rose... Urgh. I needed to think straight.

“AW, CRAP!” I stomped the floor in rage, cracking some of the wooden boards in the process.

“What’s wrong, Farsight?” Nadyr asked from the other end of the room. The boat was already waiting on the other shore, ready for us to leave. We just needed to patch Rose up and we’d be good to go, but I was incapable of doing anything.

“I just have no idea what I’m doing!” I roared.

“Just cover the biggest wounds and bring her over! If we stand here for too long, there will be more scyllids coming for us.”

The threat of having to face another horde of those small scaly monsters acted like a spark in my brain, solving the deadlock I had driven myself into. Trying not to lose any minute, I patched Rose up as good as my null knowledge of healing and medicine allowed me to; in order to leave the ruined building as soon as possible. Needless to say I felt pathetic while tightly rolling meters of bandage around Rose’s wounded body in a highly inefficient way, but with the certainty of an attack if I took too long those feelings were something I would have to live with.

Nadyr looked utterly nervous on the boat, both by the ever growing chance of coming across another flock of scyllids and by the small distance to our goal. Every now and then, he would look at me with an expression that urged me to hurry up, which didn’t contribute to my effectivity. As much as I liked having the half-zebra around, that facet of his personality was rather uncomfortable. When something was interesting for him, he would trample over anything that stood in his way. The only reason he didn’t leave Rose behind was because there was a hint of honor in him; but that wouldn’t stop him from bickering constantly.

“Are you done yet?” he yelled. “I’m leaving you two here, I swear to Celestia!”

“Nadyr, you’re not letting me concentrate!” I growled. “I’m almost done, dammit. Besides, you need magic to move the boat, so give me a minute, alright?”

“I’ve given you a hell of a lot of minutes, bro.” Nadyr grinned with irony. “Just bring her over. You don’t need to mummify her, Farsight, what you’ve done should be enough.”

I looked at Rose and saw the amount of bandages I had rolled around her. Indeed, Nadyr had a point when he mentioned I was about to mummify the little filly, so I packed the remaining medical supplies back into her saddlebag and with help of my telekinesis I put her on my back. She was surprisingly light weighted, and the short trip from the bed to the boat was less of a challenge than what I had expected. The half-zebra greeted us with a sarcastic smirk and a bow, to which I paid absolutely no attention; and I used my magic to power the engine. Time to go.

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I navigated the small vessel with an eye on the horizon and the other on Rose, as I was worried sick about her status. Nadyr was checking up on her constantly, but neither him nor I had the necessary knowledge to do anything more than praying to the Goddesses for her recovery. Silently, I cursed the idea of coming to this green hell, while I drove the boat around the remains of a high-rise building; a true labyrinth of rusted steel beams and crackled concrete slabs that tested my skill to the point of breakdown.

However, the piloting was almost automatic, as all my thoughts gravitated around Rose and our plan; which was rather simple. Explore, loot, return, profit; simple guidelines to get rich rather quickly; but they didn't contemplate the situation the environment had driven us into. Neighorleans was a tough place for the healthy, so there's no way a wounded pony could do it through this ordeal.

"Nadyr..." I mumbled. "Do you think it's reasonable to carry on?"

The half-zebra looked at me as if he was looking at an alien.

"Farsight, are you fucking serious? We haven't come this far to turn around right now, have we? Look!" he pointed forward, to the shadows of central Neighorleans. "We can almost reach out and grab the loot!"

"Yes..." I sighed. "You're right, Nadyr, we're almost there, but I'm very afraid about Rose. She's still unconscious, and we can't just leave her alone out here! Needless to say that we can't drag her around like a meat puppet, either."

"We'll have to do something with her, Farsight... we can't just leave." Nadyr looked worried too, which made me feel a bit more of sympathy towards him. "I know you care about Rose, damn, I do too, but this is bigger than all of us. There won't be another chance, and you know it."

"Why don't we turn around and head to Mairairie? I bet they will have something that we can use."

"Oh, you're suggesting that? Farsight, do you remember what brought us here? It was your big, fancy plan to climb the ladder!"

"Yes, so what? You seemed all fired up about having found Neighorleans!" I roared.

"Of course I was!" Nadyr gave me an angry look. "Because I know that there's a big loot to be found here! Neighorleans hosts the last unsearched Bank Of Equestria!"

"So that's why you wanted to come so badly." I hissed. "Everything adds up rather clearly now."

"No, it doesn't add up, Farsight, not in the way you think it does. I wouldn't have pressed to cross the portal if you hadn't needed it; I just did so because it was beneficial to the both of us, for your plan and for my purposes."

"Well, if it's beneficial for your purposes, it will keep being beneficial even if we return to secure Rose's life. That's more important than money to me."

"Money, Farsight? You haven't understood a thing. I'm talking about your plan, bro. Your time is running out, and if we don't act quickly the NER will forget about you!"

He was right, and I grunted in frustration. Indeed, we had been through quite a lot of trouble to get to the lost city, and I was suggesting we turned around. It was reasonable to be against that idea, and part of my mind wanted to push forward; but the other part was too worried about Rose. Come to think of it, I was starting to see Rose as a sort of daughter; taking great care about her wellness and her growth as a mare. That very vision was what conflicted with my plans and my logic, putting me in such a dilemma.

“Shit!” I spat in anger. “I know, and once again, I feel useless!”

“Useless?” Nadyr smiled peacefully. “Bro, you’re far from useless; but you’ll have to learn that you can’t be the best in every single thing you come across. Anyway, you’re good at thinking, so think in a way of making ends meet here!”

Nadyr gave me a friendly pat in the head when he said those last words, and I couldn’t help to feel my worries dilute a bit. I looked at Rose, still lying unconscious on the boat floor, and I tried to figure out a way of exploring the Neighorleans ruins without leaving Rose exposed to the local predators; and while my mind was convulsively trying to come out with a good solution, the filly shook lightly. It was a sudden and subtle move, not much more than a spasm, but it was there; and I saw it with my own two eyes.

“Nadyr!” I yelled.

“What?” The half-zebra leapt, startled.

“Rose has moved... Maybe she’s coming back?”

I stared at the filly, internally praying for her to open her eyes. There was no doubt that her status had changed, as her eyelids were shaking and her breathing had become deep and regular.

“You see?” Nadyr smirked. “She’s about to wake up, so your problem has solved itself.”

“Nadyr...” I smiled. “Has nopony told you that acting smug is rude?”

“Says the smug king of Freedom Field. Come on, bro, cut me some slack.”

We both laughed lightly, relieved by the upcoming recovery of our companion; who coughed dimly and opened her eyes. She fought with her own body, trying to come back into the world of the living; but she wasn’t quite making it. My initial happiness turned into anguish and quick heartbeats as I saw the filly move spasmodically on the boat floor.

“She’s not making it!” I grunted. “What should we do, Nadyr?”

“You’re asking me?” Nadyr seemed surprised.

“Of course I’m asking you, Celestia-dammit!” I roared. “I have no idea about what to do now, but if we don’t do anything we might lose her; so if you have any idea I’d love to hear about it!”

“Just calm down, Farsight.” Nadyr started searching through Rose’s saddlebags.

“Calm down? You want me to calm down? She’s dying on us, for Luna’s sake! Don’t ask me to calm down.”

“Uuuuhhhh...” Rose emitted a faint moan, and my heart froze for a second.

“Don’t worry, Rose, we’ll bring you back.” I whispered at the filly’s ear, while I urged Nadyr to do something.

“Here, have her eat one of these.” Nadyr gave me a blister of small, round, brightly colored tablets.

“Dash?” I looked at the half-zebra in a mixture of perplexment and anger. “DASH? Are you out of your mind? This is a damn drug, I’ve seen what it does to ponies!”

“Stop whining, Farsight. Dash, by itself, is nothing more than buffed-up adrenaline. Ponies get addicted to it because it gives you the boost you need without almost any side effect. I’m just saying you give her a small dose to help her.”

“How do you happen to know all that?”

“I was raised on a zebra village, and Dash is a zebra drug, remember? I wouldn’t know how to brew them myself, but I do know what they do and their dangers. Just trust me on this one, please.”

I huffed, considering the pros and cons of trusting my companion on this one. The cons of not doing so were very clear, as Rose’s life was on the line; but the risks of giving Dash to the wounded filly were evident. I had witnessed the effects of the overuse of Dash on an adult pony, so the damage it could do on a filly’s body was probably far greater. Still, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself if she didn’t make it; so I decided to take the

risk.

“Sorry, Rose.” I sighed, as I slid the tablet into her muzzle, and then I poured water from my canister down her throat, forcing her to swallow.

We stood in silence while we waited for the drug to cause its effect on the unconscious filly. Nadyr seemed calm and confident, but I couldn’t look at Rose without feeling a rush of guilt and regret, as she had been badly wounded because I had been unable to protect her from the scyllids, nor had I been capable of healing her properly. Suddenly, she convulsed and coughed, and I leapt forward to grab her in my forelegs. Her eyes opened wide and she stared blankly into space, but she was back in our world. I couldn’t hold back the tears.

“Rose...” I hugged her carefully. “It’s so good to have you back.”

“Farsight...” she mumbled. “What happened?”

“You were wounded badly by the scyllids, remember?” I tried to keep my tone calm and relaxed, but I still was too shaken to effectively achieve that. “You blacked out, and we had to patch you up in a hurry... I’m sorry.”

Rose looked at her body, almost covered in bandages, and smiled dimly. All her movements were slow and heavy, as if she was floating in some dense liquid. She was obviously very weak, but she tried to keep cheerful. I couldn’t help but to admire her spirit.

“It’s OK, Farsight... You used too many bandages, but that’s fine... don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Rose. Now rest, you’re still too weak.”

Rose nodded clumsily and I returned her to the floor of the boat, where she tried to catch some sleep. Nadyr had been watching the whole scene with a face of annoyance in his face, as if all my worries for the filly were nothing more than a nuisance.

“Are you done yet?” he growled. “She’s fine now, so let’s hit the town.”

“She’s not fine, she’s very weak.” I replied, rather angry at him for his evident disdain. “What if she blacks out once again? Are we going to stuff her in Dash?”

Nadyr slammed his hooves in anger against the boat, and looked at me with a fire I hadn’t yet seen in his ambarine eyes.

“All right, bro. This is how things are going to go from now on. You’re obviously new to extreme environments like this swamp, whereas I’m used to them. Therefore, you’re letting me handle things and tell you what to do and what not. Our agreement was meant to provide benefit to the two of us, and until now you have been the only one profiting from it; so I’m claiming my part. We are going to raid that bank, understood?”

Nadyr exuded violence and anger from every pore, and I had witnessed what he was capable of doing when he was enraged. My instinct of self-preservation kicked in, so I swallowed my pride and accepted his lead. Only for that time, though.

“Understood.” I nodded.

“Perfect.” Nadyr grinned. “Get the boat moving, I’ll lead the way.”

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It had taken us a long while, but we were finally getting into the center of the lost city of Neighborleans. Ever since Rose had woken up, I had kept an eye on her, piqued by a mixture of fear of how she might evolve and happiness for her recovery. During the whole trip she had been dozing off on the floor of the boat, her small body twitching every now and then as her mind tried to get over the traumatic experience she had suffered.

I kept on checking on her every now and then, and at the same time followed Nadyr’s directions to navigate the boat across the ruins of the city. This time was the first time I wasn’t leading the expedition, and it made me feel rather resentful. Nadyr was acting out of pure greed, moved by the expectation of finding a treasure that might not even exist. After all, whatever that bank could be holding, it wasn’t worthy enough to die for,

since pre-War bits had no value nowadays. Even the copper-nickel mixture they were made of was of no worth to the traders. I guess that, if we had had a place to melt the coins, we could have obtained raw copper and nickel, which Rose would be able to sell; but we lacked the technology.

This brought me to consider whether Nadyr knew something he wasn't telling me, and that shook me from the inside. Shielding himself in the purpose of working for me, he had provided himself of helping hooves to bring a scheme of his own into happening. My anger grew even bigger because of Rose's condition, and I swore to myself that if anything were to happen to the filly I would make him respond for it.

Anyway, another part of me saw things devoid of all feelings and worries. Whatever Nadyr held in his mind was for all of us to share, as that had been our mutual agreement, so his welfare was my welfare. Besides, he needed at least a living unicorn to move around the swamp, so his dominion over me was biased. In the very end, if things got too ugly, I had the winning hoof; although I frankly didn't want to resort to it. Even if I was mad at him, the half-zebra had proven to be a worthy sidekick.

Speak of the devil, Nadyr stood on the prow of the boat, looking forward with obvious excitement. At that very moment, he resembled a small foal waiting to receive his presents on Hearth's Warming Day. His head moved from side to side, piercing into the dim light of the Neighborleans Dome, looking for his promised target; and he barked orders from time to time. Obviously, he was so carried away by the perspective of a quick fortune that he didn't care about the state of Rose, who seemed to become weaker minute by minute.

The filly's condition was my first and only worry at the moment, as I considered myself responsible of what might happen to her. We couldn't return to Mairairie anymore because of two reasons, the one being the long distance and the other being Nadyr's unveiled menace. However, we couldn't risk heading straight to the Bank, since we didn't know what we would have to face or how long it would take us to return. Maybe, if we managed to find some medical supplies around town, we would be able to raid the bank with some guarantee of success for the three of us.

However, that implied convincing Nadyr about making a stop, and I wasn't too sure about his disposition towards that. We were already navigating within the old town of Neighborleans, and the ruined high-rise buildings had been substituted by smaller households in a far better state, most of them two or three levels high, of bright colour, the majority of them being red or green. A common characteristic of the houses were the balustrades of white coated metal that formed intricate patterns.

We kept navigating down the channel, across the colorful houses of old Neighborleans. The silence was amazing and rather creepy, to be honest. As we approached the bright and magnificent houses of the city center, we saw that something had been celebrated the day it all stopped forever. Garlands hung from house to house, crossing the streets in a colorful display of little flags and decorations. The street lamps were covered in confetti and serpentines, and bright colored festoons hung from the balustrades. All that festive environment, frozen in a two century old photograph, delivered a sad, gloomy feeling to me. I couldn't help remembering Samedi's tale of how the Curse had fallen upon Neighborleans the day of Mardi Gras, and I felt shivers go down my spine.

All the party gear scattered in the streets was a discordant point in the city. Everything added up in the form of some sort of macabre joke, having turned Neighborleans into some kind of celebration of death and devastation. We were travelling between the lovely houses and beneath the creepy festive decoration, and while I was looking for a safe place to leave the boat and start exploring I happened to find a hole in a wall of the nearest building.

"Nadyr, we need to stop." I said.

"Say what now?" Nadyr looked back, surprised.

"Rose's condition is worsening. I won't carry on until we find some medical supplies."

Nadyr grumbled and nodded.

"Fine, try getting close to that house! It's a good place to start with."

I nodded and moved the rudder to approach the house as carefully as possible, since the boat had already

taken some damage from our trip through a wall in the outskirts. I glanced at my companions as I navigated the vessel, and I saw Nadyr looking rather displeased with that stop. In her uneasy sleep, Rose had managed to untie most of her bandages, leaving only the essential ones on her. The amount of discarded material on the floor of the boat showed how useless I was as a combat nurse, but I had the feeling that it could become a rather stable lash to hold the boat in place.

With a soft clunk, the boat touched the wall of the building and I grabbed the bandages. While I tied one of the ends to the boat, Nadyr leapt agilely out of the skiff and into the building; then I hurled the other end of the bandages to him and he secured the boat to one of the beams of the house.

“All right, everything fixed!” Nadyr grunted. “Let’s get cracking!”

“Rose, you stay here.” I said to the filly. “Have some rest, we’ll be back soon.”

The wounded filly replied with a senseless moan, as she was still in an uneasy sleep; but I took that as a yes. I looked at her and felt a sting of anguish, seeing her badly patched up and curled into a ball; knowing that all of this was my fault. I crouched to give her a soft pat in the back when Nadyr’s voice brought me back to our task.

“You coming or what?”

“Yes, yes.” I nodded. “Coming.”

I jumped to dry soil and took a look around at the place we had landed at. It was what remained of a two-room apartment, furnished in a similar way to those I had scavenged at Freedom Field. However, dampness had taken its toll on the contents of the household, and most of the clothwork was ruined and rotten; the wooden furniture had grown all kinds of fungi and the exposed metallic materials were covered in a layer of rust.

“You’re the master scavenger, Farsight.” Nadyr said. “What should we do now?”

“We’re going to spread out and start searching. I’ll take this room; you search through the other room, which appears to be a bath. Remember, we’re looking for medical supplies. Good hunting!”

“Alright then, Farsight.” Nadyr nodded.

The half-zebra strutted carelessly out of the room with a tune in his lips, while I headed to the nearest closet to see if there was anything worthwhile in it. In the meantime, I could try to find out more about Nadyr’s reasons, and whether he was hiding something from me or not.

“Hey, Nadyr!” I called out. “I’m worried about something.”

“Something that isn’t Rose?”

“Yes, something that isn’t Rose.” I was annoyed by his evident lack of interest in the filly. “What is in that bank that is so important to you?”

“Nothing.” Nadyr’s reply was swift.

“NOTHING?” I roared. “Are you positively telling me you’ve dragged us down here, putting Rose in risk in the process, to go looking for nothing?”

Nadyr’s laughter came clearly from the adjacent room.

“No, no! Not that kind of nothing... I meant that there’s nothing special, nothing specific I’m looking for. Just the usual loot you’d expect to be hidden in a Bank’s vault.”

“But Nadyr, paper money, or metal coins for that instance are worthless nowadays. The raw materials they’re made out of are more valuable than the bits themselves.”

“Farsight, I ain’t talking about bits or notes. I’m talking about real valuables: jewels, works of art, precious gemstones, gold, silver, platinum! That would make us filthy rich in no time!”

Nadyr sounded honest enough, and his reasons, once unveiled, seemed quite straightforward. However, his anxious drive towards that bank was really dangerous, and Rose’s health was more important to me than

money. Of course I wanted to become filthy rich, as Nadyr had said, but it was a matter of costs against benefits; and Rose's life was a cost I wasn't willing to incur.

"I keep thinking it's too dangerous. Rose might not make it through this one."

"You and your damn filly once again!" Nadyr grumbled. "What happened to your master plan, Farsight? Are you in doubt?"

"I am not. Rose must live, and I'm willing to send any plan down the drain if it means a present danger for her."

"Whoa, whoa, since when have you become her daddy?" Nadyr snickered.

"Ever since I realized she was my responsibility!"

"What, didn't she have a father?" Nadyr's tone was becoming more and more impertinent.

"No, she had no parents, and she needs a father figure, dammit!"

"Says who?" Nadyr yelled. "I had no father figure, like you say, and I'm perfectly fine!"

"Of course, you're perfectly fine. That's why you've become a hired gun."

"Look who's talking! You're as low down as I am, Farsight. Don't teach me lessons in ethics, you're not entitled to do so!"

Nadyr was starting to sound rather disgruntled, so my practical sense kicked in to avoid greater damage.

"Listen, this argument is pointless. You want the money and I want to keep Rose safe. Neither of us is going to convince the other to change his goals, so let's work fast and try to find whatever we can use."

I felt anger and resentment bubble inside me, but I knew those feelings weren't of any use now, so I tried to focus on my task; that was to find any possible loot in the furniture of the room we were in. Most of the closets had been torn apart by the same tide that had open a hole in the wall, but some of the cupboards had resisted, even if badly damaged. The drawers hid all kinds of objects, ranging from pre-War tools to clothing, but most of it was useless for us. The clothes were rotten and falling apart, the few tools and materials I could find were all rusted and broken; and the money found had no value nowadays.

"Any luck, bro?" Nadyr asked. His face showed that he wasn't too pleased about his findings.

"What have you found?"

"A couple of pure adrenaline shots. I don't know who lived here, but either he had a serious health problem or he loved to get high. Anyway, these will be more helpful than Dash. What about you, Farsight?" Nadyr asked.

"Nothing yet, but hold on a minute." I opened the last drawer and saw something shiny inside. I lifted it with my magic and found myself staring at a holotape. "Why hello there!"

"What is it?" Nadyr took a nervous step forward.

"Calm down, Nadyr. You won't be able to sell this, it's an ages-old holotape."

"Aw, crap."

"Anyway, I'm curious about its content. Let's see what it has to say."

I activated the tape, and the room was flooded by the sound of light static, caused by the old age of the recording. Unlike Cheval's document, which had been preserved with care over the years, this new holotape had been exposed to the dampness and the radiation for more than two centuries. However, when the voice came out, it was clear enough to be understood. A stallion with a deep and singing intonation, similar to Nadyr's, spoke to the recorder.

*"Dearest Cypher,*

*I'm really looking forward to this year's Mardi Gras, so that we can meet again. I received your letters*

*some days ago, and I'm really glad that you found a job in Canterlot. After all the time you took and the effort you made; you deserved to get something in return. I've missed you, I always will, but over all I want you to be happy. As long as we can see each other every now and then, I'll be fine.*

*I don't know how the war machine is affecting Canterlot and the Court, but here in Neighorleans things have changed quite a lot for worse. I guess that as the city has a large zebra population, the Government must have thought this is a nest of vipers. The Ministry of Morale is all over the place, conducting 'investigations' and questioning the ponies and zebras around. Remember our friend Kuma? She had a meeting with Pinkie Pie's ponies, and from how she looked the day after, I wouldn't say she had a good time.*

*Anyway, I suppose this is what happens in a war, isn't it? After all, we haven't been in a war before... Changing subject, you do know who is coming to Maredi Gras, don't you? You will surely know, as you live in Canterlot, but just in case you haven't heard, I'll break it up to you. Rarity's coming to town! Apparently, she has been invited to the opening party of the Rising Sun hotel, and then she'll take part in the Grand Parade. I'm going to try and get a good spot to see her in all her magnificence. You know me, Cypher, I've always liked her.*

*Anyway, Cypher, dear; I hope this transmission gets to you in time. I'm saving a copy in a holotape, just in case the lines get cut.*

*Stay safe and come back soon.*

*Love,*

*Wheat Tower"*

The tape clicked and went mute. I felt surprised about the fact that one of the Ministry Mares had been in Neighorleans the very day of the Curse, assuming the recording referred to that year; although taking into account the mentions to the War I would bet my caps on my assumption. Questions filled my head and my curiosity urged me to investigate deeper, but we were here on a totally different mission. As the tape was useless, I discarded it and returned it to the drawer.

"Well, that's all to be seen here." I shrugged. "Shall we move on?"

"Bro, I thought you'd be willing to know more about what the tape said. It's not like you to leave ends open." Nadyr smiled.

"Well, to be totally honest, I do want to find out about this Maredi Gras day and the Curse, but we've come here with a clear mission; and we can't waste our time here. Rose is waiting and Geiger's ticking, remember?"

"You're right, I almost forgot about it. Let's get moving, then; we've got a lot of apartments to check!"

I almost galloped out of the flat, wanting to check as many rooms as possible in a short period of time. Nadyr shared my hurry driven by different motives, but at least we agreed on something, probably the first thing since we arrived in the swamp.

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After a couple of hours, the apartment building we had landed in had been thoroughly searched; but we didn't manage to find much. Nadyr managed to retrieve a couple of silver earrings that somepony had left behind, while I had managed to find some painkillers and some really old potions.

Back at the boat, we found Rose awake and waiting for us, looking reasonably better than before. She even smiled when she saw us arrive. I couldn't help myself and jumped to the boat, rocking it dangerously, then grabbed Rose in a tight embrace.

"Rose! Are you alright?" I asked. I knew she wasn't, but I couldn't avoid the question.

"I'm... a bit battered, but I'll get over it." Rose smiled. "Thanks for caring about me, Farsight."

"It's the least I can do." I replied. "You seem to have recovered rather fast."

"I drank a vial of healing potion I hid for emergency cases... I never thought I would have to use it myself.

Still, I'm far from being fine." Rose's voice broke and she staggered.

"See?" Nadyr asked. "She's in working order now. Sorry for being so harsh, missy, but I came here with a purpose, and I want to fulfil it."

"Don't worry, I understand." Rose nodded and smiled dimly.

Her kind soul made me hope for a better world every time she spoke. Nadyr smiled and gave Rose a soft yet caring embrace, and my resentment towards him washed away; as I saw that in the very deep, beyond his greed and selfishness, he cared about Rose. In the meantime, I kept thinking about the last tape we had found and the presence of Rarity in town right before the Curse fell. It couldn't be a coincidence.

"Farsight, what are you up to?" Nadyr asked.

"Nothing really, just thinking about the Curse and the tape we heard." I shrugged once again. "Never mind, though. We have other things to care about. Where to, Nadyr?"

The half-zebra hissed and frowned in disgust.

"I just don't know, bro. I know the bank is here somewhere, but I have no more directions. We'll have to explore from here, I'm afraid."

"Don't worry." Rose said calmly. "We will help you, right, Farsight?"

"Of course we will." I nodded. "Do you know how the building looks like, just to narrow down the search?"

"Sorry, bro, I know that there's a Bank in Neighorleans, but I don't know anything more."

"Fair enough." I nodded. "We'll have to economize effort and look as carefully as possible. Is that OK with you, Rose?"

"No problem, Farsight." Rose smiled dimly.

I nodded and started the engine once again, orienting the boat slowly towards the center of town. If there was something big to be found in Neighorleans, just as Nadyr wanted, it should be close to the center. If not, well, we would return empty-hooved. We navigated through streets covered in garlands and flags announcing the Grand Parade, some of them showing the three diamonds that composed the emblem of the Ministry of Image, as well as Rarity's Cutie Mark.

"What do you think about that?" I asked, pointing at the emblem of the diamonds.

"About what?" Rose asked back.

"About the tape. Rose, to put it in a nutshell, just know that Rarity was here the day the Curse fell. I think there has to be some relationship between the Curse and Rarity's presence in Neighorleans. It can't be all a large coincidence."

"How so?" Nadyr asked. "Have you got anything that proves otherwise?"

"I have no proof, but according to the Book of the Light Bringer, Rarity died in Canterlot when the Pink Cloud was cast. Therefore, if she was here, she must have survived the Curse; and given the deadly nature of the Curse, the only way she could survive it was that she knew about it."

"Bro, sorry to break it up to you, but the Book of the Light Bringer is a novel, pure fiction. That is no real proof."

"Nadyr, I have the feeling that there is a lot of truth to the Book. In fact, I believe the Book to be actual history, even if it has been spiced up to make it reader-friendly."

"Meh... Have it your way, Farsight, you might as well be right. Just don't get too hyped up with conspiracy theories, alright?"

"Fine, fine."

"Erm, excuse me, please." Rose said. "Could this be what we are looking for, Farsight?"

I looked at the building Rose was pointing at, and found myself staring across the street towards an old and distinguished construction, different from all the others around it; as it was built in solid pink granite and white bricks. The front end of the building had a classic look, with a colonnade embracing large paneled windows with carefully crafted stained glass windows that depicted scenes of pre-War Equestria. In the middle of the façade, a single granite arch surrounded a large circular rosette with a solar pattern on it. The construction was, indeed, astonishing, but what made it really interesting was the sign on top of the central arch: “NATIONAL BANK OF EQUESTRIA”.

“I think we just hit the target.” I smiled. “Good job, Rose.”

Rose smiled happily. “Thank you!”

“Damn, that’s the grand prize indeed!” Nadyr pranced in joy. “Let’s go, bro, we have no time to lose!”

I nodded and drove the boat towards the bank. It seemed that our luck was right about to change for good.

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The broken window opened like a portal to a new world, as we crossed the vine-covered frame into the stillness of the Bank building; carefully steering the boat to avoid the menacing crystal shards that remained attached to pieces of metallic lattice. The bank had been flooded up to the first floor, and the tellers and offices of the low-end workers laid under three meters of thick, dark swamp water. I drove the skiff forward, zigzagging between the hanging ornate lamps, towards a marble staircase that popped out of the water.

“All the lower floors are underwater.” I mumbled.

“So what’s the problem?” Nadyr asked, surprised.

“Well, I suppose the vaults will be in the basement, right? If they’re flooded, we can’t reach them.”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” Nadyr smiled and gave me a pat. “In the swamplands, the important stuff is stored in the upper floors, as the swamp may flood the houses anytime. Not to this extent, really, but the concept is the same. My bet is that the security vaults will be in the top floor of the bank.”

“Well, let’s just hope you’re right, Nadyr, or all this journey will have been in vain. Rose, this time you’ll have to come with us. If we need to move or carry stuff, it’s better to have two unicorns than just one; and you’re the party healer after all. Will you be able to keep up?”

“I’ll try...” Rose mumbled, as she got out of the boat with an unsure step. She had become visibly weaker in the last minutes.

Carefully, the three of us trotted upstairs, with all our senses in tension. The upper floors of the Bank were covered in wood panels, and valuable yet old rugs laid on the floor, muffling the sound of hooves against the floor. We walked along a rather long corridor sunken in darkness, as the doors to the offices along it were closed. The light of my PipBuck showed us what stood before our muzzles, but we couldn’t make out if there was anything waiting for us further. Anyway, my E.F.S. showed no traces of activity close to us.

We had started a thorough search of the building, checking office after office, trying to find any directions to the main vault of the bank, but we were having a rather tough luck. All the terminals were disconnected or useless, and the notes we were finding stored in the different desks were unreadable because of the everlasting dampness.

“So much work for nothing!” Nadyr bucked the floor in anger.

“Have patience, Nadyr. We still haven’t searched all the building.” I looked at the map on my PipBuck and checked our route. “The whole East wing of the bank awaits us.”

“I can’t believe you still want to carry on, Farsight. There’s nothing here, bro, can’t you see it?”

“All right, go ahead, leave! However, if I happen to find anything, it’s mine to keep. You aren’t getting a single cap!” I frowned to emphasize my words.

Nadyr found himself in a catch, and stuttered a quick reply.

“A-all right. I’ll follow you.”

“Good, let’s get back on track, all right?”

*Chirrrrrrp.*

“Wait a minute, what was that?” I asked, surprised by the sudden noise.

*Chirrrrrp. Chirrrrrrrrp.*

“My E.F.S. isn’t picking any signal? What is that noise?” The three of us looked around, dazed and confused, trying to find the source of a sound that was becoming more and more constant over time.

“I don’t know!” Rose was shaking badly, both of weakness and of fear. “Nadyr, any idea?”

“I have no idea!” Nadyr yelled, picking his gun from the holster. “They sound like some sort of Sprites, but I didn’t know there were any in the swamp!”

“Lovely, a new menace.” I grumbled and picked the rifle. If we were about to fight Sprites, though, it wouldn’t be all that useful.

*Chirrrrrp. Chirrrrrrrp. Chirrrrrrrrrrrrrrp.*

The chirping sound echoed through all the building, making it impossible to tell where they were coming from. The only sure thing was that it had to be a lot of them, judging from the roaring noise. The three of us stood back to back, our weapons ready, waiting for the enemy to come; while I nervously checked the E.F.S. with no success. The radar was blank.

Suddenly, a clanging noise echoed in the emptiness of the bank and a small pack of colorful balls flowed out of the ventilation ducts on the walls; balls about a hoof wide, with two big composed eyes and insectoid wings that fluttered rapidly. Even if there were less than two dozens of them, we found ourselves outnumbered by the Parasprites, chirping and rapidly flying in circles around us.

“Parasprites…” I whispered. “I thought these are harmless for ponies.”

“Not anymore, bro. Most parasprites have developed a taste for pony meat.”

“You can’t be serious.” I felt my heart almost stop at the sudden realization. We were doomed.

“I’m very serious, bro. Just keep your mouth shut, you don’t want any of them buggers eating you from the inside out.”

“Wh-Why haven’t they attacked yet?” Rose stuttered. “What are they waiting for?”

“Oh, what the hell, it’s not a duel of honor. Take cover, Rose. Nadyr, let’s blast them!”

“With pleasure.”

The two of us aimed our guns to the fluttering insects, and with a silent prayer for a lucky shot (as I had no way of getting a good aim), I pulled the trigger of my rifle.

**BLAM!**

My rifle and Nadyr’s gun roared at the same time, sending hell to our tiny yet dangerous foes. Suddenly, around five or six of the sprites blasted into a purple cloud of ichor and innards, while the rest of them held still for a second; time that we used to break away of their pin.

“Nice shot.” I said to my companion as we rushed out of the room followed by a mob of angry sprites.

“Yours wasn’t bad either. Hey, sprites, whatcha gonna do now?” Nadyr roared in satisfaction.

The sprites stopped and breathed deep, and then they vomited a massive green flame, almost scorching our tails. Just what we needed, fire-breathing sprites. Besides, the wooden panels in the corridor had caught fire and thick smoke started to fill the air.

“Aw, cock. Dragonsprites.” The name was totally unintended, but it sounded catchy.

“They breathe fire?” Rose whined.

“It seems they do...Any ideas on how to handle them?” Nadyr asked.

“I think the time for subtleties is over, don’t you agree, Nadyr?”

“Oh, you read my mind, bro.”

I told Rose to get to cover while Nadyr and I prepared to make our stand. The half-zebra had stuck his revolver in his muzzle and looked at the coming cloud of sprites with the fire of excitement in his eyes. I checked Lily’s magazine state, inserted a last bullet to fill it properly, and aimed the cannon to the fire-breathing insects that buzzed towards us. I cursed my E.F.S. for not working in this situation and got ready for the showdown.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Fire at will.” Nadyr winked.

The sprites were already within their attack range when we cocked our guns and pulled the trigger. The air filled with the cacophony of explosions and the smell of gunpowder; and the sprites blew up to pieces. I can’t tell whether my shots were well-aimed or not, but the dragonsprites had the bad habit of exploding in a flame of balefire when shot, what caused that a single shot could take out several of them at once. We both unloaded our magazines and out of habit, we hastily started reloading our guns; but we noticed that all the sprites had been wiped out.

“Well, so much for those bastards.” I smiled.

“Erm, guys...” Rose whispered. “This place is starting to burn, so we should consider moving on.”

Indeed, the flames provoked by the dragonsprite horde were starting to slowly spread down the corridor. The dampness slowed the process down, but it couldn’t simply take out the fire, so our quest had a new time limit.

“We need to find the vault as soon as possible. Double time, folks!”

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“Try a bit harder, Nadyr.” I said calmly. “If it doesn’t budge, we could try hitting it at once.”

Nadyr huffed and panted, then slammed his hind hooves against the sturdy wooden door. The frame shook and the gate emitted a nagging creak, but it didn’t open. We had been trying our best against it, but the door leading to the Vault room wouldn’t give in. I had an eye on the door and another one on Rose, who was weaker minute by minute. I noticed that she was shaking slightly although she tried to hide it, and I couldn’t avoid worrying about her. However, we were too close now to turn back.

“I wish I had brought the drill with me.” I mumbled.

“What drill?” Nadyr asked, puzzled.

“It’s a long story... when I first started scavenging in Freedom Field, I used a drill I found to break the locks open. It’s far more useful than the lockpicks most Wastelanders carry around.”

“Yes...” Nadyr sighed. “A drill would have been very helpful here.”

“But you have no drill.” Rose sighed. “So forget about it, you two.”

I was surprised about Rose’s harsh reply, but I had to admit that in her state I would have been harsh as well.

“What do you propose, then?” I asked. “Brute force isn’t working here.”

“Of course. Brute force doesn’t work almost anywhere...” Rose sat on her flanks in exhaustion.

“And you have any ideas, missy?” Nadyr clenched his teeth in anger.

“Enough!” I stood between them, looking sternly at both of my companions. “I don’t know if you have noticed, but the smoke smell is becoming stronger minute by minute. The fire seems to be spreading, we

have no time to lose.”

Nadyr and Rose sniffed the air, checking what I had just said.

“You’re right, I’m afraid.” Rose nodded. “Why don’t you shoot the door open?”

“Isn’t that brute force after all?” Nadyr frowned.

“Nadyr, enough.” I said cuttingly. “If you have a better plan, speak up. Right now, I can’t come up with anything more convenient myself. Nothing? Good, let me handle this.”

I lifted the rifle and aimed at the keyhole. Holding my breath and keeping the grip as steady as possible, I pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

The shot echoed across the corridors, until the rugs managed to muffle the sound completely. When the smoke cleared, I took a look at the results of my “lockpicking” attempt. The brass lock had been shattered by the bullet, but the door remained closed. However, it didn’t seem as sturdy as before, and when I touched it with my forehoof, the door creaked and moved.

“Nice shot, bro.” Nadyr smiled, as we watched the door opening slowly.

“Let’s move, before this place burns down.”

We hastily entered the Vault room, willing to know what was stored in the Security chamber. Nadyr raced forward, blinded by promises of gold and jewels, works of art and other kinds of riches; whereas I cared more about Rose, who seemed to be slowly burning out. The effect of the potion had long worn out and her condition was dropping quickly. Anyway, I also had a pinch of curiosity about the hidden secrets of both this bank and this city; and my mind was already getting ready for a showdown with a terminal or an automated lock. What we saw was the last thing we would have expected, though.

The safe deposit was open.

“What in the living fuck is this?” Nadyr yelled in despair, leaping into the metal-plated room. “IT’S OPEN AND EMPTY! FUCK!”

“Calm down, Nadyr. This was something that could happen, and you know it.” I tried to reason with him, but he was way too altered.

“So what, Farsight? You’re telling me that we’ve done all this trip for nothing? This city was supposed a living treasure!”

“We might not be the first scavengers here. Somepony might have come and looted this before.”

“Bullshit.” Nadyr spat.

“Have you got any proof that we’re the first ones to reach this room?”

“Uh... maybe I do.” Rose whispered. She had crawled all the way to the huge metal door of the safe deposit, that upon a second look, reminded me of the geared Stable door. “Look at the layer of dust on the safe door edges. It hasn’t been moved for a very long time.”

I checked what Rose pointed out and noticed that, indeed, the door edges were covered in a thick layer of grey dust that claimed that the metallic gate had been in that position for a really long while.

“If that’s so, there must be an explanation as to why this safe was emptied before the Curse.” I concluded. “This has to be related to Rarity’s visit, no doubt.”

“What do you suggest to do, then?” Nadyr asked, resigned.

“Let’s go check the Bank director’s office. If there is some explanation, it should be over there.”

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A few minutes later, we were standing in the director’s office, a luxurious room decorated with taste and care.

Wooden panels covered the walls, costly delicate rugs spanned across the floor and the furniture was all matching and elegant. Made out of mahogany, the desk, the shelves on the walls and the meeting table in the room would have been sold at exorbitant prices in Freedom Field, but there was no way we could carry that back, needless to say that the boat wouldn't take all that weight.

The desk was located in the far end of the room, back to back to three large arched windows leading to a balcony over the sunken surface of Neighorleans. The few light that filtered through the dense foliage cover sipped into the room, giving it an eerie green look. On the desk, humming with an electric buzz that made me feel comfortable, stood a working terminal. Whatever we could find, it would have to be in there.

"A working terminal?" Nadyr asked. "It's the first thing that has power in this town."

"Yes, it's surprising for me as well." I nodded. "I assume it will be working out of some independent generator; probably a small gemstone-powered arcano-generator. Those things last forever."

Nadyr shrugged and started snooping around the shelves while I focused on the terminal. Its green glow and its hum welcomed me, and the jack of my PipBuck was answered with a soft beep by the computer. While my hoofheld device battled the security protocols of the director's terminal, I took a look at Rose. She had sat down to rest a bit, but she was having obvious trouble to keep conscious. She acted like a zombie, with her eyes partially closed and looking towards infinity; while her muzzle was slightly open and drooling. Knowing that time was of the essence, I turned my PipBuck hacking system to manual control and started leading the battle myself.

It took me my time and my sweat, but I finally managed to unlock the system. Once inside, I found myself staring at countless memos about management meetings, customer satisfaction policies or investment lines; all of which was worthless to us at the moment. Something did catch my eye, though. An encrypted file was looming there, apparently unrelated to everything else, almost demanding me to uncover its secrets. Once again, I activated all my hacking protocols and took the file head on; and after twenty minutes of trial and error I was faced to a really shocking revelation. My face must have shown it clearly, because Nadyr got close to me and asked.

"Bro, what is wrong?"

"You should take a look at this. It pretty much explains everything."

Nadyr got close and looked at the screen. Even if he was beside me, I couldn't help reading the text printed green on black out loud.

*Classified Document MOI\_00267567*

*Subject: Operation Masquerade.*

*Priority: Top.*

*Warning, this document is for your eyes only.*

*Dear Sir/Madam,*

*The following document is a reminder of the actions your organization must execute in order for the operation to be a complete success. Needless to say that the following information must be kept in complete secrecy and within a circle of trust.*

*As you know, the nation of Equestria is suffering the effects of a long and ravaging war, and while we strongly believe in the final victory, we are aware that the glorious capital of Canterlot is more exposed to enemy attacks than ever before. In consequence, a series of plans have been developed to secure key assets for the welfare of the Nation from enemy hooves.*

*Operation Masquerade's ultimate goal is to relocate the entirety of the Equestrian gold reserves from Canterlot to a safer destination, in this case the city of Neighorleans. As chief of the local branch of the National Bank of Equestria, you are required to cooperate in this endeavour.*

*Your task in this operative will be that of overseeing the construction of a high security Vault on the*

*previously defined location (view document MOI\_00264511) and to move all the contents of your safe deposit to this Vault. When the final checks have been made, you will be required to cooperate with the Government Agents in order to oversee the final transport of the Gold into the safe vault.*

*Remember to delete this document according to the standard protocol.*

There was the explanation we needed, and it did effectively connect Rarity to Neighorleans in the context of a covert operation. It did also justify why the safe deposit was empty, and it prompted another question: if Neighorleans was a pot of gold, where was the end of the rainbow? The file was prompting us to check a second document, but there was no trace of it within the computer.

“Bro, where’s that file?” Nadyr asked, excited. His eyes gleamed with greed. “We need to find that gold.”

“It’s not here.” I shook my head in resignation.

“What do you mean it’s not here?”

“I mean it’s nowhere to be found! It’s gone!”

“Come on, bro! Find it! I’m not leaving this place barehooved!”

“Just calm down, Nadyr!” I grunted. “It could have been in another computer, in a networked server, anywhere as much as I know! By putting pressure on me I’m not going to find it any quicker!”

“Uhn... Farsight... I...” Rose muttered and tried to get up, but she stumbled and fell to the floor, unconscious.

“Rose!” I yelled, and leapt towards her.

Her light body was lying on a rug like a broken puppet, and when I grabbed her I noticed she wasn’t breathing. I shook in despair as I tried to think about what to do. Last time we had used a tablet of Dash, but that time she was only unconscious. Dash wouldn’t work this time.

“She’s not breathing, Nadyr!” I cried.

“Has she got a pulse?” the half-zebra asked.

“A pulse? Who the fuck cares about a pulse? She’s not breathing! Isn’t that enough?”

Nadyr took a step forward and grabbed the filly’s forehoof, while he seemed to be trying to feel something. Then, he smiled and sighed.

“Bro, I don’t want you to be my combat medic. She has a pulse and she IS breathing, although she is very weak.” Nadyr looked through Rose’s saddlebags and picked an adrenaline shot. “Use this, straight to her heart. It should give her enough energy to carry on.”

“In her heart?”

“Yes, you need to thrust it strong enough into her to get through the breastplate and into the heart.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“Just trust me.” Nadyr grunted. “It worked last time, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, alright.” I huffed. “Where’s the heart?”

Nadyr took a look at Rose, flipped her over and pointed at a spot on her breast.

“Over here.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve seen my share of pony corpses to be able to locate the heart. I’m sure.”

“I really, really hope you’re right.” I lifted the shot with my magic, the needle menacingly pointing to Rose’s body. “Let’s count to three, OK?”

“Right.”

“One... Two... THREE!”

I thrust the needle into Rose's body, and I found out to my surprise that it penetrated deep without much resistance. Almost shaking in fear, I unloaded the shot into her body and carefully removed the needle. While holding her close to avoid blood from spilling, I waited to see if the adrenaline did any effect on the filly. Seconds seemed to last for minutes, minutes seemed to last for hours; but all of a sudden, Rose shook and gasped for air. What would happen next was completely unexpected.

The filly started levitating, with her eyes opened wide, but showing no irises or pupils. Her blank eyes stared at the walls and her mouth opened in a silent scream; and before any of us could do anything, we were hit by an unexplainable force. I felt my mind explode as it was swept away by a shockwave of energy coming from Rose's body, and then everything went black.

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Note: Perk added.

Swamp Dweller: The negative effects of the "Swamp Newcomer" perk are removed, and you get +1 Perception in swamp environments.

## ***Chapter 11: Who Wants To Live Forever***

*“This is Agent Turner, Equestrian Military Intelligence Service, codename “Tennant”, transmitting in a secure frequency to Army HQ from Neighorleans. This transmission is classified for being viewed only by Intelligence High Command Chief Colonel Forlorn Star.*

*My Colonel,*

*Operation Masquerade has been completed by the joint forces of the Ministry of Image and the Army Intelligence. We could say that the operation was a success, taking into account that the entirety of the Gold has been successfully relocated to its final destination. The transport was made without any issues and the whole operative reached extraction point within the specified time frame.*

*However, there is a matter of concern to national security in the undertaking of Masquerade. The so-called defense system for the Vault complex has suffered... unforeseen consequences. I think I can assure that the Army Intel operative on location didn't know anything about the Ministry Mare's direct implication in the operation; and I sincerely hope that High Command was as well unaware of her intentions.*

*The unfortunate turn of events was motivated by a direct order from Minister Rarity herself, against which both me and Agent Conneighry couldn't do anything. The original plan for Operation Masquerade implied casting a multi-point cloaking spell in order to efficiently hide the location of the Gold Vault to unwanted eyes. However, the Ministry Mare decided to single-hoovedly alter the plan, by ordering her agents to deploy a city-level binding spell.*

*As I'm sure you know, those binding spells are meant to tie the soul of the subject to a given location, avoiding it to leave the bound place. Such magic is considered necromantic and its usage has been highly restricted by both the Army and the Government. However, Rarity decided to use her authority to enforce the casting of the spell, so both Conneighry and I had no other choice than to cast an anti-spell for our protection.*

*The consequences of the spell were disastrous. I don't know what happened exactly, but the spell swept away all trace of life from the entire city of Neighorleans and its surroundings. The death toll has been greater than that of any of the battles we have fought on this war. If any of this were to come to ears of the public, the image of the Government would suffer a catastrophic blow; putting all our war effort in jeopardy.*

*I highly encourage High Command to begin the preparations of Operation Atlantis. I know this plan was devised in the event of a zebra takeover of the area, but the risks we're taking by not covering our mistakes in Neighorleans are far greater than the cost of flooding the city.*

*May time have mercy on all of us. Turner out.”*

It had to be a dream, but it felt so good I didn't want it to end.

I was sitting in a throne or a big chair of some kind, in the middle of a grandiose room covered in screens that showed maps, charts and flows of numbers. By means of some unknown magic, I kept everything under control with a blink of an eye. With a single thought, I could alter the world around me; deciding who lived and who died; delivering fortune and ruin with a flick of a switch. My power was absolute and unquestionable, and for a minute, I felt the happiness of an accomplished goal.

I knew it couldn't be real, though. My memory had a blank spot between the Bank of Neighorleans and this situation, but no blackout could have been long enough to prompt such a change of the situation. Once I realized that, the environment I was in didn't seem as appealing as it did before. Everything looked stale, fake, fabricated; and even my actions appeared to be orchestrated by something different.

I tried to get up and walk around the room, but I found out that I was shackled to the throne and unable to move. The screens had changed and showed images of death and destruction, but of those who I cared about: Rose, Nadyr, Stuka... Their lifeless, maimed bodies flickered from screen to screen, constantly catching my

eyes, no matter where I looked at. A message echoed in the room, an ominous, metallic voice that rumbled in the emptiness of the chamber.

“It is all your fault. Their blood is on your hooves.” The voice said.

What had happened? It had to be a dream, but I wasn't all so sure. The blackout in my mind could have lasted for days or months, and I couldn't tell what had caused it. Had I been unconscious, or was I suffering some sort of amnesia? Were my hooves indeed stained with the blood of my companions, or was this a trick of my mind, making me suffer just for fun? My nerves started to cripple under the pressure of a warped reality and the inability to tell if I was experiencing reality or just a fantasy.

What worried me the most was that I felt totally awake, totally aware of the world around me. All the signs I could read pointed out towards one same thing: that chamber of torture was real, and somehow, by some unknown turn of events, I had ended up chained there. Trying to ignore all the bombardment of bloody images and creepy messages, I focused on finding a way out of my imprisonment.

The first step would imply breaking or opening the shackles that bound me to the chair. With the right tools, it wouldn't take me more than a minute or two to have one hoof free of their tight embrace; but there was nothing to be used to pry the cuffs open. I shook nervously from side to side with the purpose of having a wider line of sight, in order to find something I could help myself with. However, in the very deep, I wanted to break the chains with my bare force, and something told me it was an exercise in futility.

“Why are you shaking so hard, Farsight?” the voice asked. “You're not moving anywhere.”

The voice echoed in my mind, and it sounded familiar; as if I had heard it before, yet warped, altered... different. Anyway, that voice made something tick in my mind, something that simply didn't add up with all that I had been experiencing to the moment.

“Farsight?” The voice echoed. “Farsight!”

Suddenly, the screen-filled chamber disappeared and I opened my eyes. I was looking at a wooden ceiling, lying on a rug-covered floor; and the air smelled like moisture and smoke, both scents mixing themselves and fighting for supremacy. Suddenly, I remembered what had happened before I blacked out. Rose had unleashed some sort of power blast that had knocked me out cold. Just an instant before, I had injected an adrenaline shot right into the filly's heart.

The thought of Rose made me almost jump from the floor, looking for the filly. My eyes leapt from side to side of the room, searching for any trace of her; and I must admit that in my initial nerve I didn't even consider checking my E.F.S. for the presence of any life form nearby. Anyway, after a couple of minutes of anxious searching, I found her looking out the window.

“Rose...” I sighed. “You're alright.”

“Uh-uh.” Rose shook her head, then she turned around and looked at me in the eyes. “Wrong number, Farsight.”

I expected to see Rose's two big emerald irises, but I found myself looking at two small jade dots; and my blood froze instantly as I realized who was in charge of Rose's body. My mind raced to find the optimal way of confronting the situation, as the lovely Rose had been substituted by our unwanted partner Lavender. Knowing how deadly and violent she was, I had to be extremely careful in our way of acting, or I wouldn't live to tell about it.

“La-Lavender.” I gulped. “What happened? How long has it been?”

“You mean since I knocked you out?” Lavender asked, visibly amused. “I can't tell, I'd say that two or three hours. And answering to your first question, I can't say I did it consciously. The rush of adrenaline to the heart must have prompted some sort of defensive mechanism, a telekinetic blast or something in the likes of that.”

I nodded. Indeed, it was the most plausible explanation to what took place when I injected the drug right in her heart. However, that didn't explain why Lavender had taken Rose's spot in control of her body. I needed

to know how on earth she had managed to gain command, but asking it directly could be blunt, and having Lavender involved, unwise.

“Uh... so... where is Nadyr?”

“Stripey?” Lavender shrugged. “Don’t know. He must have woken up before I did, and I suppose he left looking for the gold. That greedy fuck.”

“How come he has woken up before? Wouldn’t you be the one to rise first, since you were the caster of the blast?”

“I thought so too, but I guess that those of us who are magic-enabled are more sensitive to magic as well. Stripes is a stump when it comes to magic, so he must have been hit lighter by the blast.”

“That sounds reasonable.” I smiled dimly.

“Of course it sounds reasonable.” Lavender snickered. “You don’t seem too worried about him, though.”

“I am worried, but you do know me, Lavender; I tend to hide emotions.” I shrugged once again, as I thought that showing indifference would keep her calm. “Tell me, why are you here?”

“It’s rather simple, bright buck. Rose has taken some serious hits, so I’m here until she gets better... if she gets better.”

The “if she gets better” part sent shivers down my spine, but I hid them as well as I could.

“So you do care about Rose, after all.”

“I care about me, first and foremost. After all, if Rose dies, I die too; so her well being is my well being. Speaking of which, who has turned me into a living mummy?”

“I guess that would be me.” I smiled and arched an eyebrow.

“Shit, Farsight, you’re a damn disgrace; but I don’t think that mister Stripey is any better, am I right?”

I felt rather surprised at Lavender’s way of acting. She was still ruthless and aggressive, but she hadn’t started a bloodshed yet; maybe because of her body’s state. Not that I complained, though; as I didn’t want to face her wrath.

“That’s just how it goes, Lavender. Rose is the healer of this party, Nadyr and I do what we can when it comes to bandages and medicine.”

“Yeah, yeah, quit your excuses, Farsight. It’s not like things are going to change, anyway.”

I smiled and nodded, as I somehow liked Lavender’s new stance. Her menacing presence still loomed around, but she was a little bit more civilized than before, something that I really welcomed.

“That’s very true, I’ll give you that. Can I ask you another question?”

“Go ahead.” She grunted. “You’re going to do it anyway.”

“You seem much more... temperate than the last time we spoke. Have you really changed, or are you just playing with us?”

Lavender let go a subtle laugh full of disdain towards me and looked at me with true amusement in her face. Unlike the previous times we had met, the psychotic personality of Lavender didn’t manifest so clearly. The blood-chilling broad smile was gone, and in consequence, her range of facial expressions was far wider; leaving the contracted eyes as the only way of identifying which one of the personalities was in command.

“Ah, Farsight, for being such a smart buck, you sure can be naive when you push yourself. I haven’t become a new pony, but I haven’t been inactive while Rose was in command. You know, seeing the world through her eyes has made me think about the world we live in. I was designed to act in a controlled environment, in a Stable, and all my code was made to work as planned inside the boundaries of such a civilization.”

“With ‘working as planned’ you mean being a psychotic murderer?”

“What is making you so sheepish, Farsight? I am an experiment, meant to push the boundaries of science beyond what ponykind had ever achieved; and if that meant tampering with our moral limits, so be it.” Lavender looked at my eyes and laughed. “Is that remorse in your face, Farsight? After all the scheming you’ve been doing, playing with ponies’ lives as if they were pawns on your board, you don’t seem like the kind of pony that feels remorse. What a disappointment, I thought you were worth observing.”

“Remorse?” I shrugged. “Maybe... after all, I’m a Stable Pony as well, raised to their outdated morality. Don’t rush to dump me, though; I adapt quickly to new environments.”

“Of course you do...” Lavender chuckled. “Adapt or perish, as they say. Anyway, as I said, I was meant to remain inside the Stable environment, but then you came and showed me that there is a whole wide world out there. A rich, morally ambiguous world where good and bad are not clear boundaries. That very ambiguity made me adapt and yes, change. This world is so violent and ruthless that my urge for blood and destruction gets covered without me having to act; and for that, Farsight, I thank you.”

“Why, you’re welcome.” I smiled, trying to appear relaxed, although I was still afraid of what she could do. “I’m glad to be of some use.”

“Always polite and in control, even under pressure.” Lavender strutted down the room. “You are such a surprising individual, Farsight.”

“Chaos only generates more chaos.” I looked at the evil filly with a grin of irony. “And unless you want to bring the world down, chaos is of little help.”

“Says he who conspired to topple the gangs of Freedom Field. You don’t seem so tough from up close.” Lavender took a clumsy step forward.

“Lavender...” I said as firmly as I could. “If we want to achieve something out of this trip, we should cooperate. You’ve seen what the local fauna can do to a pony, so we should stick together and work hard to return in a piece.”

“Of course, I was just having a bit of fun.” Lavender looked at me with a faked sadness, as if she was mimicking a sorry filly. “Won’t you let me have an instant of solace?”

“I think we should establish some rules of engagement, Lavender. First, no disemboweling, at least not with us; and if you want to crush our enemies to a bloody pulp, you’re free to do so, as long as we both agree. Secondly, treat Rose with respect, because you two depend on each other, as much as you might despise that fact. Last but not least, when Rose is good to go, I want you to let her retake command.”

“I agree on rules one and two, but three is a no-go. Did you seriously think I would accept that?”

“Not really, but this is a negotiation; in which I make an offer and you pose a counteroffer. Let’s hear what you’ve got to say.”

Lavender smiled and lowered her eyelids, giving me a smug and ironic look.

“As I said, I can live with rule one and I agree with rule two. Now, when it comes to deciding who must be in control, I say that you let us two handle it.”

Her tone had become menacing, making clear that she wasn’t negotiating. It would be either her way or no way; and knowing what Lavender was capable of, I wasn’t going to confront her... you may call it cowardice, I call it survival.

“Oh well,” I shrugged. “I can live with that.”

“I think we have an agreement, Farsight.” Lavender smiled proudly, and I couldn’t help to smile as well. Somehow, I saw myself reflected on her attitude, and I liked that.

“Indeed, we have, and I am very glad about it!” I smiled and gave her a kind hoofshake. “Shouldn’t we get moving?”

“Sorry to break it up to you, but our escape route has been cut off.” Lavender frowned. “The boat is gone.”

“But the boat needs magic to work... How has he managed to leave with it?”

“Oh, it was rather funny!” Lavender emitted a crackling laugh. “You should have seen him trying to row across the swamp with the help of a makeshift ore. It was rather pathetic, but he did move alright.”

I felt anger bubble inside me once again. How could he have been so greedy to leave us there? Was he so blinded by the perspective of becoming rich that he had put his life at risk by going alone to Celestia knew where? And what was more worrying for me, had he deliberately abandoned us not to have to split the reward?

“How could he even leave us here?” I groaned.

“I told you, Stripes is a good-for-nothing greedy fuck.” Lavender shrugged. “You should know what to expect when joining a bloke like that.”

“He’s greedy alright.” I hissed. “If I put my hooves on him, he’s going to explain some stuff.”

“Oh, yes, he will, but first we need to get out of here.” Lavender snickered and turned to look through the window once again.

“If you happen to know something I don’t...”

*Chirrrrrrp.*

The sound made me freeze solid for a second, as I saw a sky-blue Dragonsprite appear behind Lavender’s head. The filly didn’t seem to worry much about the small insect, though.

“There’s more of them?” I effortlessly tried to grab hold of my gun.

“No, there’s only this one left, but it doesn’t seem to be aggressive. Apparently, the whole pack was guarding this.”

Lavender lifted a small object out of her saddlebag and put it on the director’s table. I walked close to take a look at it, and I found myself gazing at a shiny ingot of pure gold. It had been engraved with the symbol of pre-war Equestria, the blazing sun; and the inscription “24 carat gold” was clearly visible on the top side. The promise of riches had started becoming a reality.

“The Gold of Equestria...” I gasped in amazement. “Wasn’t it supposed to have been moved from here?”

“Well, this one was hidden in one of the deposit boxes. I found the ingot while searching the safe, and the sprite came out of nowhere and started following me.”

“Then, is it coming with us?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s coming with us.” Lavender’s tone admitted no reply.

“Oh well, as long as it doesn’t try to roast us, I have nothing against it.” I shrugged. After all, a tamed dragonsprite was a neat weapon. “Has it got a name yet?”

“I called it *Bonafyre*.”

“Bonafyre, huh?” I walked close to the sprite. “Alright, Bonafyre, welcome to the crew. Keep your burning in store until we need it, okay?”

Bonafyre chirped and fluttered up and down, mimicking a nod.

“All right, I’ll take that as a yes.”

“It seems to have a greater intelligence than what I expected.” Lavender smiled with admiration. “This world is a box of surprises.”

“Indeed.” I nodded. “Anyway, we’re getting sidetracked. We need to find a way out of this place.”

I returned to the computer and started searching through the hard drive for an evacuation plan of the bank or anything that told us how to reach another building without having to go down to street level. I had the feeling that important buildings such as that one had to be equipped with some sort of secondary escape route in case of robbery or attack, but there was nothing to be found.

“Any luck?” Lavender asked.

“Nope.” I sighed. “There’s a lot of stuff in here, but nothing that we can profit of.”

Right as I was saying that, the computer screen flickered and a message was prompted to the front end: “*You will find nothing here. What you’re looking for was deleted long ago.*” I flinched with surprise when I noticed what the system was telling me. I tried operating some of the keys in order to dismiss the message, but it seemed as control had been removed from the terminal; just to be operated by some remote, unknown entity.

“Who is there?” I yelled. “Who is watching? Show yourself!”

“Are we being watched?” Lavender grinned. “Ooh, this is getting interesting.”

The screen flashed again and the message displayed on the screen switched to a different one. “*I mean you no harm. Don’t be afraid.*” If whoever was behind was trying to appeal to our trust, he wasn’t doing things too good.

“Somepony that asks me not to be afraid doesn’t sound too honest to me.” Lavender grumbled.

“Whoever this buck is, he responds to our words, so he must be listening.” I frowned. “Hey! Is that your only way of communication? Can’t you reach us in any other way?”

After that last question, we eagerly waited for our mysterious stalker’s reply. Time seemed to grind to a stop while the two of us stared at the computer screen, nervously paying attention to the flicker of any pixel. After a little while, the message changed once again: “*Is that a PipBuck in your forehoof?*”

“No, he’s just happy to see you.” Lavender croaked.

“Lavender!” I yelled. “Indeed, it’s a PipBuck.”

The window on the screen disappeared for a second and then appeared with another message: “*Radio, 95.5 MHz. I’m listening.*” With such a clear command on screen, I quickly stuck the earbloom of the hoofheld device into my right ear and tuned the radio to the given frequency.

“Hey!” The voice of a seemingly young stallion roared in my ear, causing me to turn the volume knob down.

“Finally, something less cryptic than a computer screen.” I sighed.

“Don’t bicker so much. It was the only way to get through you.”

“Oh, you actually hear me?”

“Yes I do. PipBucks carry a two-way radio, mate; so you’ve got to be talking to a microphone.”

I winced, surprised. I took out my earbloom and found that the cable had a small terminal in the middle, with a tiny receiver membrane in it. That was the microphone the unknown buck talked about. All clear, then.

“Yes, I have a microphone. I’m surprised I hadn’t seen it before.” I shrugged.

“No problem, mate. It happens.”

“You’re from Trottingham?” I asked. His accent reminded me of Mixer’s.

“Why, yes. I am.”

“Are you a ghoul, mate?” I mimicked his usual sentence ending. Trottingham had been destroyed by the megaspells, according to Mixer. Therefore, if I was speaking with some buck that came from Trottingham, he had to be a ghoul. There was no other way.

“Ghoul? Sorry, friend. I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Now something didn’t add up. If he wasn’t a ghoul and he was from Trottingham, where or when were we? What had this teleporter done to us? And what sort of place was Neighorleans? Was it some sort of endless Tartarus where Nadyr, Rose and I had been thrown into because of our greed? I’d have to get as much information from this mysterious pony as possible.

“All right, never mind. Who am I speaking to?”

“Agent Turner, Equestrian Army Intelligence, working with the Ministry of Image. I suppose there is no problem in revealing my identity to you. After all, I’m not undercover.”

Equestrian Army Intelligence? Ministry of Image? That was just freaking IMPOSSIBLE! I had no data about the Army, but the Ministry hadn’t existed for two hundred and twenty years, and now I was talking to an agent of that very organization? My mind was starting to feel numb from all the incoherent data I had been fed in the last minutes. I breathed deep and tried to keep calm, despite all the chaos around me.

“Pleased to meet you, agent Turner. My name is Farsight, freelance scavenger; and this is my companion, Lavender.”

“My pleasure, Farsight and company. What brings you to Neighborleans?”

That was the kind of tricky question I was expecting, more now that I knew I was talking to a Ministry of Image agent. Whoever this Turner buck was, I wasn’t going to tell him openly that we had come to find the lost Gold of Equestria. Luckily for me, I had an ace up my sleeve.

“My companions and I came to look for whatever we could find, but we seem to be one zebra short; so we’re pretty much looking for my lost friend.”

“I see. Maybe I can help you out with that.”

“How?”

“The city had a working surveillance system, but now the power’s down. Maybe you can help me put it back online, and I’ll be able to look for your friend.”

Sweet Celestia, did Turner actually know about the megaspells and the War? Or easier still, hadn’t he simply taken a look at the state of the city? Half sunken and ruined, no doubt the power was down. Anyway, Turner seemed to have some vantage position over the Neighborleans ruins, so he was our best bet to find Nadyr and, with a hint of luck, the gold.

“Wait a minute. If the power is down, how come you can actually see us?”

“That room has a power supply of its own, as do other places in town. However, the general power supply is down, so most of the cameras are not working.”

“All right, but you’ll have to navigate me through town. We’re new around here. And besides, we need to get out of here first.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Turner sounded confident. “There is a safe tunnel coming out from that room, that leads to the city hall.”

“Shouldn’t that tunnel be flooded?”

“Flooded?” Turner doubted to answer. “Well, I can’t say about the other end; but the airlocks beneath you are in working order.”

“Fine... where is the entrance?”

“Oh, about that, give me just a minute.”

Something clicked in the wall, and one of the shelves rolled aside to reveal a dark corridor leading downward. Turner wasn’t lying about the tunnel, so he could be saying the truth about the rest as well.

“Well, there’s the tunnel alright. Now, if you could tell me where you want us to go...”

“Of course, mate. Jack the PipBuck into the computer again.”

I walked to the desk once again and connected my hoofheld device to the input port of the terminal. Some seconds later, a beep in the PipBuck let me know that data had been correctly downloaded, and I looked at the area map; where a new marker labeled “Bayou Power Transformer Station” had appeared.

“Great, that’s all we need.” I nodded. “Lavender, let’s get moving!”

Lavender sighed and trotted into the dark passageway that Turner had opened for us, and I followed her at a close distance. The hallway turned into a staircase just ten steps away from the entrance, and all traces of light were soon gone. I took the lead and used my PipBuck to light the way into the subterranean tunnel.

“I never thought you would be so trusting.” Lavender snickered. “That Turner buck could be sending us into a trap, as far as we know. Besides, who the hell is he? I thought this place was abandoned.”

“Indeed, the questions he causes in my mind are many, and he will have to give me proper answers if I am to cooperate further with him; but for the moment he’s solved our deadlock and he hasn’t said anything we have managed to prove wrong. Let’s give him the benefit of trust... for now.”

“If you say so...” Lavender sighed, and I guess she shrugged as well. “For our own sake, I hope you’re right.”

We kept walking downstairs for minutes, sunken in an oppressive silence. The signs of dampness in the concrete walls were more and more evident as we descended, and I was quite sure that we were already below water level. My biggest fear at the moment was to find that the tunnel was flooded or collapsed, as it was our only hope to exit the Bank. If that way out was of no use, we would have to wait for Nadyr to come back... if and only if he came back.

Soon, we reached the lower end of the stairs and walked into the lower corridor. The heavy reinforced metal gate of an airlock blocked the way and a small terminal glowed beside it. A quick browse of the terminal let me know that the status of the adjacent chamber was good, and that it was ready to be used. Therefore, I walked in and after Lavender had done the same, I locked the outside door by means of the inner terminal. With a hiss of air and the clunky noise of gears turning, the gate sealed itself and the computer inside the airlock prompted me to open the door leading to the tunnel. As far as I knew, it could be full of water, what would mean our death... but it’s not like we had any other choice.

“Ready for the unknown, Lavender?” I asked.

“Open the damn gate already.” Lavender huffed. “There’s no need for theatrics here.”

“All right. Hold your breath.”

I pressed the button to open the door, and wished for the best while the cogs in the gate turned to unlock it. The airlock opened with a hiss and a squeak, but there was no wave of black swamp water flooding the small antechamber; only silence. I couldn’t help to sigh in relief as I walked into the endless darkness of the tunnel.

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The green beam of my PipBuck lamp pierced the darkness, showing what lied a few meters before us, which was nothing more than damp concrete. While I walked along that linear void, I kept thinking about what I had discussed with agent Turner. First of all, the fact that he was an Equestrian Army - MoI agent working in Neighorleans was highly confusing. The Army and the Ministry of Image, as well as the rest of the pre-War Equestria had been wiped out that fateful day. There was no point in making me think the Army or the Ministries were still functioning. Therefore, my guess was that, whoever this Turner was, he was impersonating a pre-War pony that might have been an actual Army or MoI agent. Probably, as convoluted as it might sound, this fellow was probably another scavenger that had started acting as the Ministry agent to obtain some benefit from a ghoulish population, like the one of Maretairie. Not the most straightforward of plans, but it was plausible.

Secondly, his ignorance of the current state of the city ticked me off. Turner seemed surprised about the power being down, which, but if he had known about how wrecked Neighorleans was (which was obvious at a quick glance), it shouldn’t have been much of a surprise. Instead, he spoke as if nothing had happened here in the past two hundred and twenty years. It was just absurd; just plain absurd.

Despite all that, we had no better choice than following Turner’s advice and orientation. With Nadyr gone, Lavender and I were alone in a harsh environment, looking for something we knew very little about. After all, this situation had been caused by the half-zebra from the very beginning, and now we needed to meet up with him before anything else wrong happened.

“Thinking about Turner?” Lavender asked. She had crept up to me, and her voice made me leap aside.

“Ugh... don’t do that again, Lavender, please. I don’t want to have a heart attack.” I sighed. “And answering to your question; yes, I am. Don’t tell me you can read minds as well.”

“No, I can’t.” Lavender snickered. “It would be great, though. Anyway, it’s not hard to guess. You haven’t said a word since we entered the tunnel, and we’ve been walking for a long while. Something is bubbling in that mind of yours, and given the circumstances, that was the best bet.”

“You know me far too well.” I smiled in the dark, even if she could not see me. “Mind if I share my thoughts with you, Lavender?”

“Go ahead, it’s not like there’s anything better to do down here. Apart from walking out of this hellhole, that is.”

“Fair enough.” I mumbled. “He says he’s an agent of the Equestrian Army Intelligence. However, if I am not mistaken, the Equestrian Army vanished the day the megaspells fell. If that is the case, how come he keeps claiming that? It would be wiser to introduce yourself as a scavenger, a mercenary or a private investigator... those abound in the Wasteland nowadays.”

“Well, for some reason, he doesn’t seem to worry much about what others might think of him. This place isn’t precisely crowded, so I assume that crafting a solid cover isn’t much of a need over here. Besides, the common Wastelander isn’t a malevolent schemer like you are. You have a special ability to sense conspiracies around you, you know?”

I couldn’t help laughing out loud. Lavender had a fine sense of sarcasm, something that I really liked.

“Ah, Lavender, *touché*. Anyway, let’s assume he’s not lying to us. Let’s assume he IS a true agent. How do you explain that?”

“Well, he could be one of those nasty ghouls.”

“It does sound like the most plausible explanation, but you’ve heard other ghouls.”

“Strictly speaking, I haven’t, since Rose was in command at the moment, but I see where you’re going. The voice, right?”

“Exactly. Ghouls have a raspy, grating tone in their voices; but Turner’s voice sounded clean and normal. That’s what is confusing me.”

“Meh. Stop stressing your brain, Farsight.” Lavender huffed. “Whatever it is, you can’t do anything about it right now, so concentrate on getting us out of this tunnel. When the time comes, you’ll get the answers you seek.”

“I hope you’re right, Lavender.” I sighed. “This place is like a gigantic puzzle. Every time we take a step forward, the path seems to shift and change.”

“How poetic.” Lavender snickered.

I ignored Lavender’s sarcastic remark, since my PipBuck had come alive with a message indicating that we had found the City Hall of Neighborleans. Obviously, the PipBuck didn’t pay much attention at the height of the signal, since we had to be many meters below ground, or in this case, water level. Anyway, that meant that we had made it almost all the way across the tunnel.

“What was that?” the filly asked.

“My PipBuck says we’re underneath the City Hall. There must be an airlock nearby, so pay attention.”

“Whatever.”

I ignored Lavender’s lack of enthusiasm and started waving the PipBuck lamp from side to side, looking for the distinctive metal gate of the airlock that would get us out of the tunnel and into the light once again. A few steps into the darkness later, I found myself staring at the door we had to cross. It was closed, but not locked, as the bolts meant to keep it shut hadn’t taken its place on the frame. With a pinch of magic, we would be able to make our way through the airlock.

“Lavender! Come help me with this!”

“What is it, Farsight?” Lavender came grunting.

“The airlock door is closed and the power is down... we’ll need to get out by force. Care to give me a hoof?”

Lavender let go a long and disdainful sigh, just before her horn lit the tunnel red and the gate moved aside with an eldritch, deep rustling noise. I hurried into the airlock, willing to know if the other door was open or locked. We were so close to leaving that tunnel that I was feeling really anxious about seeing daylight again, even if dim and green. The other door was closed too, but once again, the latches were unlocked. I assumed it was the standard procedure in the event of a power loss, in order to avoid leaving anypony trapped in the airlock. I didn’t wait for Lavender this time, I just rammed into the door and started pushing with all my might; and after ten seconds of painstaking effort, the gate whined and moved, leaving a way open for us to leave that dark tunnel.

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“Turner!” I called. “Are you listening?”

“I bet you a hundred caps that he isn’t.” Lavender grunted. “I never thought you’d be so trusting to follow a ghost through a radiated swamp. Seriously, Farsight, I thought you were a rational buck.”

I sighed. “You know what, Lavender? You’re right. We’re chasing shadows here. It’s just too bad that we need to return home with something more than our empty hooves.”

Lavender looked at me with a smug grin of irony.

“Coming from another pony, say Nadyr, I would have believed that statement. Coming from you, I simply don’t. That Turner voice has got you properly hooked, and you’re solving mysteries right now.”

“That’s just a secondary objective.” I mumbled.

“Look at you!” Lavender laughed. “Talking all military and stuff. Secondary objective.”

“Fine, have it your way.” I shook my head, admitting my defeat. Lavender was a tough contender when it came to dialectic battles. If she hadn’t been a psychotic mass-murderer and a filly, I would have loved her; and when I said loved, I meant loved.

The tunnel gate had opened to a small concrete-walled room that hosted nothing more than a tall spiral ladder. A quick climb later we were standing on what appeared to be the Mayor of Neighborleans’s office, a quite regal chamber with a large veranda, that provided a vantage point over the remains of the old town and the hills of the outskirts. The eerie green light filtering through the dome of leaves reinforced the image of devastation of the city. I closed my eyes and for a moment, I had a glimpse of the town’s past: vibrant activity of ponies trotting down the cobblestoned streets of the old quarter; garlands and flags that showed the festive nature of the locals, music echoing through the buildings... and as fast as it came; it went.

I found myself staring blankly into the greenish horizon, and something caught my attention. Up on a hill, close to the dome’s wall, a magnificent manor stood proudly, almost unhindered by the chaos and destruction cast by the war and Nature’s iron will. A remnant of a better past, the mansion was a classic three-floored building, painted white with grey slate roofs and porches leading to what must have been a glorious garden.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Turner’s voice spoke in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Turner! You and Lavender want to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry, Farsight. I thought you were calling me.” Turner was right, I had called him out before. I just had assumed that he simply couldn’t communicate with me. “What is it?”

“You will have to explain some things to me. Why do you pretend not to know that the city is in ruins? Your cover is just flimsy. You say that you are an Army Intelligence Agent, but then you act surprised when I mention that the streets are flooded. I want to know the truth about you before we move on.”

“The truth, eh?” Turner let go a long sigh. “Fine. I know that the city is a total disaster. I have been watching it for a very long time now, while I waited for somepony to get deep enough in the ruins to establish contact.”

"Well, here we are." I grunted. "Can you help me find my lost companion, if I restore the power?"

"Actually, don't even bother. Power can't be restored, only the backup arcano-generators work after so many years. I still want you to come to me at the Transformer Station. From there I'll be able to set things straight."

"Fine, we'll do that. By the way, I'm looking at a rather fancy house on a hill. Any ideas on what it might be?"

Turner chuckled lightly and sighed.

"You're looking at Rising Sun Manor right now, and let me guess, you're wondering why it's still untouched."

"Come to think of it, yes, it's a rather good question." I nodded. "Wait, did you just say Rising Sun? As in the Rising Sun Hotel?"

"Exactly. But all that Rising Sun Hotel thing is total bollocks. Rising Sun Manor was built with a completely different purpose."

"Explain yourself, Turner."

"I'm guessing that you'll have found the document on the Bank Director's office, haven't you?"

"The one involving 'Operation Masquerade'?"

"The very one." Turner coughed lightly. "Doesn't it raise questions in your mind?"

"Quite a lot of them, actually." I felt the thrill of a discovery run down my spine. Turner could actually tell me what was going on! "And I'm guessing you'll have the answers to those questions."

"I do, but I can't tell them to you right now. I'm depleting the power reserves I have here, and I don't want to get isolated before you get here. Once you do, I'll rest easy."

"What do you mean with that?" I felt puzzled by Turner's cryptic words.

"There is no time, Farsight. Come to the power station at once. Turner out."

The communication ended and I was left with a ton of questions and doubts in my mind. What did Turner want to say when he used the words "rest easy"? Who or what was Turner exactly, and which were his implications in the Curse of Neighborleans?

"Was that Turner?" Lavender asked from inside the Mayor's office.

"Yes." I answered hastily. "Did you find anything?"

"Nothing at all. This place has been looted before."

"Nadyr?"

"No, dust had already settled on the shelves. This place was emptied preemptively, probably before the War. This building is nothing but an big dusty husk." Lavender grunted and stretched. "Let's just leave."

"How? We don't have a boat... or did you actually find one?"

"Not really, but I did build one myself! Rather improvised, true, but it will certainly do!" Lavender boasted. "It's a makeshift skiff, with no engine, so we'll have to paddle our way forward; but it's stable and definitely seaworthy."

"Not that we have many choices. That will have to do. Lead the way."

Lavender hopped and trotted out of the office, leading me through a maze of ruined corridors and crumbling staircases, jumping through gaps on the floor through which the stench of dampness climbed from the murky waters. Finally, we came into a half-flooded room where the mentioned boat was floating. Without a doubt, it had been quickly patched up out of an old metal cabinet and some loose wooden pieces from a broken table, but at least it floated, even if it felt worryingly weak.

"You were right, you did this yourself." I mumbled. "Remind me to ask you to build a sky chariot when we

get back.”

“What makes you say that?” Lavender said with irony in her voice.

“I doubt this will hold together for more than fifteen minutes.”

“Shut up and get on the boat, Farsight.” Lavender grunted. “Don’t make me force you.”

“I guess I have no other choice...”

I jumped into the makeshift craft, which rocked violently with my landing; forcing me to use my magic to stabilize it. Lavender leapt inside after me, almost capsizing the boat in the process. Then, she used her magic to grab a couple of planks and started rotating them as paddles. Wobbling like crazy, the cabinet-boat started moving forward and out of the building. I activated the tracker in my PipBuck and started leading the way towards the power station.

“What did Turner tell you?” Lavender inquired.

“I thought you didn’t care about Turner.” I grinned. “Why so much interest now?”

“I don’t care about Turner, but he is effectively driving us around Neighborleans, instead of the alleged pot of gold we came here to find. I might as well care about my future, you know.”

I noticed true interest in Lavender’s words, and I saw a chance to dig into her mind and try to comprehend her better. As always, I just had to play my cards properly.

“I’ll answer your question if you answer mine, without restrictions.”

“Fair enough. What did he tell you?”

“He spoke about Rising Sun Manor. Remember the hotel mentioned in the holotape?”

“It wasn’t me listening. It was Rose. I caught some loose words, but I don’t know what the tape said... mind giving me a short recap?”

“OK, long story short, the Government handled some covert operations in the area involving the Gold, Rarity and the Rising Sun Manor; which ended with the whole population of the city being wiped out. Turner seems to know more about it, and he’s willing to tell me more about it, but he wants us to go to him so that he doesn’t run out of power.”

“And you’re going?”

“It involves the Gold, which keeps being our ultimate goal. Plus, he might have a way to catch up with Nadyr as well. He’s our best call to get out of this one.”

“I’m not too convinced, but you’ve got a point there. Now ask me your damn question.”

“What makes you want to kill?” I asked bluntly. This was no time for subtleties. “What makes you feel good about it?”

Lavender laughed out loud.

“You don’t get it, do you? Why do you keep looking at me as if I was a run-of-the-mill pony, Farsight? I am a compulsion, a computer generated algorithm to cause violence and wreck havoc. I wasn’t conceived to be constrained by the limits of morality, by the boundaries of good and bad. I was meant to be a machine of destruction.”

“And yet, you have a personality of your own.”

“Funny, but yes, I do. I guess that my creators failed to grasp that I could actually learn and become self-aware. By leaping from mind to mind, I started to add small bits of personality to my original algorithm. A sense of humour, feelings, emotions, qualms, fears, hopes and dreams... Little by little, they gave me something more to think about than my single purpose. Rose has added much of her own to me, you know.”

“And you’re trying to take over her now?”

“Please, Farsight, what do you think I am? I can’t just take over her, she’s just too strong for me to actually break her apart. Actually, I’ve come to like her. Through her eyes, I’ve grasped that destruction is no longer my purpose. I’ve got a fabulous potential for that, but I feel like I have a choice now.”

I felt suddenly relieved. I had thought that Lavender would always be a kill-crazy monster, but somehow, Rose’s personality had seeped into her and had changed her for the better.

“This has another problem, though.” I thought out loud. “How will you two live together?”

“I guess that, when the time comes, the two of us will make a single entity. There will be no more Lavender, just Rose. However, she won’t be the same... and this can’t happen if she doesn’t want to. If she accepts me, I would let myself go and cease to exist. After all, I was never meant to exist as a conscious being in the first place.”

I was surprised about Lavender’s attitude. I thought that she was an invader, trying to destroy Rose in her fight to have a body of her own; and now it seemed as if Rose had won the battle and Lavender was looking for a honorable capitulation. Not that I was going to hinder that outcome, in fact, I was going to endorse it.

“I see...” The PipBuck beeped. “Look, we have reached our goal!”

Our cabinet-boat was floating in front of a tall brick building covered in seaweed. One of the broken windows acted as a door through which we entered the Transformer Station, a large empty room in which the metal bulks of the many power transformers were partially sunken. Some of them still hummed dimly, which meant that the waterproof isolation had worked properly for more than two centuries.

“Where to now?” Lavender asked.

“Dock this... thing somewhere.” I replied. “I’d start looking for a control room. If Turner is in this building, he should be in a place like that.”

Lavender steered the cabinet towards a piece of concrete floor that was above water level, and we both leapt out of it. The search for Turner had begun, and he had a lot to tell me.

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Our hoofsteps echoed in the massive emptiness of the Transformer Station, while we made our way up and down the maze of catwalks that hung above the large machine chamber, partially sunken in dark swamp water. Every now and then, an odd spark would crack between the poles of a humming transformer and the surface of the water, lighting the room with a deathly blue light. A bad step and the radiation would be the least of our worries. I couldn’t help to feel a hint of sadness over the grandeur that had been lost with the War. New Pegasus (or Las Pegasus, to that extent) was a hellhole, a place of corruption and debauchery; but this city had traces of a wonderful past in it.

Layers of dust over dust had settled on the catwalks and railings of the old facility, a mute witness of the two centuries of death and abandonment that had fallen over the mausoleum of a town we were exploring. I couldn’t help wondering how come Turner hadn’t left a trail of hoofsteps while moving around the place... once again, who or what was this buck?

Step after step, I kept wondering about what our mysterious guide was after. Did he actually have information about both the Gold and the Curse, or was it only a trap for greedy, overconfident scavengers? Something in the deep of my mind warned me against Turner, but we didn’t have much of a chance anyway. Nadyr was gone, and our leads for the treasure had vanished in the Bank. Even if it was a risky call, Turner was our best bet.

"You're very silent, Farsight. Something is brewing in that mind of yours." Lavender was smiling eerily.

"You must be thinking the same as I, Lavender."

"Turner."

"Exactly. I don’t know what intentions he has, and that makes me feel uncomfortable... You know me, I like to be in control of the situation."

"Well, you are not." Lavender shrugged. "No big deal, actually. You need to learn to think reactively."

"As in action-reaction?"

"Yes, just like that. In Freedom Field, you see the board and move the pawns... out here, the board is hidden and the pawns are made of shadows. You won't be sure of anything until it has happened, so you need to consider all possibilities."

"Possibilities... Given that Turner seems to be the only living pony in this town, I fail to understand what he is after... what he can actually obtain from us."

"That is something I have been considering as well. Are we his ticket out of this prison?"

"But why hide as a pre-War agent? It would have been much simpler to approach us as a lost scavenger, don't you think?"

"It would have been the easiest way, you're right. What if he is telling us the truth? Haven't you thought that?"

"Yes..." I grunted. "Something just doesn't add up, assuming he lived before the War. A pony's lifespan doesn't stretch as much, unless it's a ghoul. How come he's still alive?"

"Well, look at me." Lavender snickered. "Properly speaking, I am over two centuries old."

"Are you implying that Turner can be a computer?"

"Possibilities, Farsight. Think in matters of possibilities. Could Turner be a computer? Most certainly. Which are the chances? Fairly few, true, but once the impossible has been discarded; whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth."

"I still don't see it as clear as you." I shook my head. Lavender's analysis was unquestionable, although the conclusion could be uncanny.

Suddenly, a loud chirp from our new companion Bonafyre broke us out of our debate. The dragonsprite had stopped in front of a blast door with an airtight seal, a proper place to hide from whatever happened to Neighborleans. The small bugger was much smarter than one could think.

"Nice job, little fellow." I congratulated the sprite. "Lavender! Come here, we might have found what we were looking for!"

"What is it?" Lavender trotted towards me with a face of curiosity I had only seen when Rose was in control. "Oh, an airlock! It does look like a hideout."

"It's manual and it is unlocked." I readied my magic. "Help me open it!"

Both our horns glowed in the penumbra of the factory, casting dancing shadows on the walls around us, while the combined power of our magic turned the squeaking wheel of the airlock door. Once the initial resistance was overcome, the gate opened with a swift move, and the three of us rushed inside, willing to face our guiding voice... but the room was empty. Only a large screen stood inside the small control chamber, as well as a two-way communicator. Static flashed in the screen, and white noise buzzed from the speakers located on the corners of the room.

"He's not here!" Lavender roared. "Now I definitely think he's playing with us!"

"Wait, Lavender. This monitor has power, unlike the rest of the building. Something is here... Turner? Can you hear me?"

Suddenly, the static in the screen disappeared and a brown unicorn buck with a rather spiky mane and blue eyes looked at me from it. He dressed in a pre-War fashion, a brown trench coat over a brown pinstripe suit and a blue shirt, and he looked reasonably young.

"Thank Celestia, you have finally found me." A smile of relief shone in his muzzle. "It's been too long."

"Too long for what, Turner? You have a lot to explain." I answered, not hiding my discomfort.

"Yes, you deserve to know what has been done to this town... what I have done to this town."

"Cut the drama." Lavender said harshly.

"Sorry if I get too carried away. Let me start: I am Agent Time Turner, of the Equestrian Military Intelligence Service. My branch was in charge of the counterintelligence, you know, finding foreign threats inside our own borders."

"Like the Ministry of Morale?" I inquired.

"No, not at all. The Ministry of Morale was a totalitarian corps to keep the populace under control. We dealt with spies, took down conspiracies before they happened, or even executed some operations in foreign territory. Pinkie's ponies were just a bunch of butchers without proper guidance."

"Just what a healthy nation needs." Lavender snickered.

"To be very honest with you, I never had much work before the War started... checking out rumours every now and then, and that was all. When the Zebras attacked, we were sent to the frontlines."

"And when were you brought here? What is Operation Masquerade?"

"It happened little before the megaspells were fired. The Government wanted to evacuate Canterlot, since they were very certain that the enemy's main attack would be fired there. As a measure to protect the nation's wealth, a rather unimportant city was chosen to hide the Gold. Neighorleans was a perfect choice: far from the frontlines, unobscured and easily defensible since it was surrounded by the sea. The Ministry of Image asked for a joint operation in order to transport the Gold and store it properly hidden from enemy spies; that's why the Army Intelligence was involved in this. Operation Masquerade was based upon the construction of a new top-class hotel in the city, since the chariots that carried the ingots could be disguised as part of the building team's equipment."

"Wait!" Lavender said. "Are you telling me that you managed to smuggle all the gold reserves of a nation by hiding them in builder chariots? How come nopony noticed it?"

"Think about it." Turner smiled gently, showing pride on the feat his organization had managed to achieve. "Neighorleans was full of Ministry of Morale goons, keeping the population at bay because of the many suspicions of spies among the zebra inhabitants. In the meantime, the Ministry of Image buys an old abandoned manor in the outskirts of town with the purpose of refurbishing it as a hotel. Nopony would ask uncomfortable questions, and if someone dared to, the answer would be that the manor was so massive and the time frame so short that a lot of workforce was required in order to get everything done."

"But you weren't building a hotel." I muttered.

"Actually, we were! At the same time, however, another team was building a vault to keep all the gold safe. Everything went on as planned, and the reserves were properly stored three days before Mare di Gras. The last step needed was to disguise the vault so that nopony asked unwanted questions."

"That's when things got out of hoof, am I right?"

"Yes." Turner's expression became darker, as if a bad memory had gone through his mind. "All we needed was to follow the plan and everything would have been solved without problems. However, Ministry Mare Rarity decided to intervene personally."

"Rarity was involved, as we suspected."

"Involved in depth, my friend. The original plan required our team to cast a multi-point cloaking spell."

"Wait a second..." I interrupted. "What is that kind of spell?"

"It's quite simple. A cloaking spell distorts the visible reality, hiding something from plain sight. However, under certain conditions, the cloaking is not perfect, and it can be spotted. By casting several spells from different locations, the resulting disguise is much more robust."

"You never did that, did you?"

"No. Rarity sent a message letting us know that she would oversee the hiding procedure. Her Ministry organized a grand party to celebrate the grand opening of the Rising Sun Hotel, thus guaranteeing that the whole city would be willing to stay and see her. You know, those were times of war. Being able to see one of the members of the Government helped give the impression that we were actually winning the War."

"What happened on the party?" Lavender asked.

"When the time was right, Rarity cast a massive binding spell. These spells are necromantic, and therefore forbidden, but she was the Ministry Mare. We had no choice than to get ready and to cast countermeasures to save ourselves."

"That spell is the Curse, right?"

"Exactly. A binding spell is used to block a soul in a given location, in this case the city of Neighorleans. Rarity didn't want a single pony to leave after having seen the Hotel finished. What happened was a terrible atrocity, which I witnessed from here. A green turmoil broke loose from the manor, freezing every single pony solid and leaving their souls trapped in a parallel plane of existence... reviving the last three days before the party in a constant loop. My partner Conneighry and I weren't consumed by the spell, neither was Rarity. However, we didn't come out unharmed."

"I don't get it. You mean you managed to escape the city, but at the same time you're here and now, talking to me... how is that even possible?" I felt really puzzled. Nothing sensible could explain the situation of Turner.

"I know it sounds absurd, but the spell did manage to bind us here... partially at least. A bit of my soul got captured in the city's surveillance system; as I was standing guard on the control room of the HQ. Ever since, this partial impression of me has been anxiously trying to contact somepony from the 'real' world, but you are the first I get to chat with in the last two hundred years."

"So, let me get this straight." I said while rubbing my hoof against my chin. "You are not the real Turner, but a sort of spell-induced replica that is stuck in that three day loop of hell; but at the same time you have a way of looking out to the real world and searching for help."

"That's exactly what happens. Farsight, you have understood it much faster than what I expected."

"Thanks. Now, do you have any idea of why the city is flooded? Who is responsible for this?"

"That would be me." Turner sighed. "The physical me, at least. When I left Neighorleans, I was haunted by the massive injustice we had caused here, and on a less dramatic thought, I knew that if this reached out to the world, the Equestrian Government would be shaken to the foundations. We needed to cover this faux-pas in a way that nopony would notice. That's when I suggested launching Operation Atlantis. Basically, it meant launching Balefire Missiles that we had captured from the Zebra Army against the levees that kept the water from taking over the city. This way, one would think that the striped ones had been the culprits of Neighorleans's destruction, and nopony would be able to find out the truth. After two centuries, though, I just want the truth to be known and the curse to be broken, so that this part of me can stop existing... peace at last."

The explanation was fairly convoluted, but I had to admit that it added up. At least, i didn't have any great flaw that made it seem absurd. Then, assuming he was telling the truth, it seemed like the Curse was the axis around which everything revolved.

"You speak of breaking the Curse, but how are we meant to do it?"

"You need to get in the loop... and stop it." Turner smiled. "It's that simple, however, nopony who was caught by the original spell can change its path from inside. An outsider is our only hope."

"And if we fail?" I assumed I knew the answer, but I had to make sure that I was right.

"If you don't succeed, you'll get caught in the Curse, forever."

"Wait a minute, Farsight!" Lavender yelled. "Are you really suggesting that we get trapped in the spell? Have you lost your damn mind?"

"I'm considering the possibilities, Lavender. I don't like the chance of being cursed forever either, but I do have the feeling that it is our only way to the Gold." I looked back at Turner. "How does one enter the alternate reality?"

"It's just a matter of time. If you stay here long enough, you'll get caught by the Curse. Of course, those of you that are magic-enabled will be tougher to break, but those who aren't will be absorbed sooner. Your zebra friend has been already sucked into the loop, I'm afraid."

"What? You could have told me that before!" I roared at Turner. "Now I have to get him out. He's a key part of my plan."

"Farsight, leave him and go for the gold." Lavender said. "The risk is just too much."

"I know." I grunted. "But we need him to carry on forward, you know that. Besides, he is a friend, as much as I can say that. I can't just forget about him..." I sighed. "This is what we'll do. You go find a way into the Manor in this reality. After all, your magic is the strongest, so you'll be the most resistant to the Curse. I'll get into the loop and I will try to break it from the inside. If I get caught, you will have to get both of us out... although I have the feeling that you won't." I smirked.

"You unfaithful bastard." Lavender snickered. "Don't get yourself killed, now that I had come to like you."

"I am just thinking about the possibilities, Lavender. Now get lost!"

Lavender winked and turned around, darting out of the room, with her pet sprite following her closely. I looked back at the screen and shrugged. Turner was smiling at me from the other side of the screen.

"You have a complicated relationship, right?"

"Complicated doesn't quite put it, Turner. The fact that two personalities live within the same filly makes it quite an ordeal."

"Two personalities? Like in a dissociative disorder?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple, but in the end it IS a dissociative disorder; and they couldn't get any more dissociative. One is sweet and peaceful, the other is aggressive and ruthless. I'm trying to get them to agree on a middle ground, but it's this close to becoming an open conflict." I cackled, "We manage to keep it together, though, at least for the moment. What do I do now, Turner?"

"Don't worry, I'll handle that."

The airlock door slammed shut and I heard the seals closing, as well as a hissing noise coming out of the vents. Sleep gas, most probably. I assumed that the Curse would be more effective against sleeping victims than against awake ones.

"I just blew my last fuse here, by activating the defense system of the room..." Turner mumbled. "Power is running out... I'll see you in the other side."

The screen went black while the room filled itself with more and more of the gas. As I breathed deep, my head started to feel numb, and my eyelids became heavier minute after minute. I laid myself on the floor and waited for sleep to come to me. I was about to play my highest gambit so far... I could as well get some rest.

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Note: Perk added.

Cursed Outsider: 10% extra resistance against mind control.



## Chapter 12: House Of The Rising Sun

*“Bonjour a tous, mes amis! The sun is shining over the beautiful Ville of Neighborleans, the spirits are high and as always, happiness is all over the place, because all of you know what time of the year it is... Maredi Gras! Here at Bayou Radio, broadcasting live from our studio in the Old Town, it's Papa Gramophone, sending good vibes to all of you ponies wanting to have fun!*

*You've been listening to the Grand Band of the Mareais, right here by my side, bringing us the swing of the old times! Thank you, mes amis, for another great piece; we'll be back at you in a minute. Don't go away! Now, let's return to the news, shall we? Hmm, to begin with, some festive announcements! The Grand Parade of tomorrow is going to be even greater than expected, with the partaking of several foreign groups that have finally made it to la Ville in time! For those of you that want to go take a look, remember, it's going to stroll down Buckbon Street, beginning at 4 PM and lasting until 7 PM!*

*Also, to all the colts and fillies out there, remember that the Municipal Costume Contest is still looking for new entrants! The requisites are simple: you must still have no Cutie Mark, and the costume must be entirely made by you or your parents! Originality and quality will be judged, so have fun, work hard and best of luck to you! Great prizes await the winners!*

*Let's now take a look outside to hear about the terrible war still raging out there... things are taking a turn for the better, folks! The Equestrian Air Force reports of a successful bombardment raid over key Zebra industrial settlements, as well of raids over the cities of Roam and Zamane. Take the fight to their homes, soldiers! Down on the ground, the trenches of Stalliongrad keep fending off attacks of the despicable striped troops, while our brave armies keep advancing into enemy territory: several enemy battalions got encircled and defeated in the Zebra city of Manetua.*

*As we always do, I now remind you of the words of our beloved Princess Luna: stay strong, believe in yourselves and do the utmost to be one step closer to victory. Train, work, live and believe; the Sun and the Moon are with you. Don't let strife bring your spirits down, and carry on. And that we will!*

*On breaking news, the grand opening of the brand new Rising Sun Hotel will be even greater! To celebrate the combined effort of the Ville of Neighborleans and the Government of Equestria in order to bring forth the creation of such a symbol of status and hope on a brighter tomorrow, the Ministry Mare Rarity herself will preside the celebrations of the Grand Party of Maredi Gras, as well of the Opening Ball of the Hotel! I don't know about you, but I will definitely be there to see the most glamorous mare in all of Equestria honor us with her glistening presence!*

*Now, that was all for the moment, so let's return to rejoice and party! Get your costumes out, leave your shame at home, dance, live and enjoy today, as we don't know what life will bring tomorrow! I will leave you with the Grand Band of the Mareais once again, may their soft brass help you get through the day with a big smile on your face! This is Bayou Radio, live from the heart of Neighborleans, and I am your beloved Papa Gramophone, conducting our little show! A bientôt a tous!"*

The muffled sound of a brass band playing a quick be-bop was the sign I needed to return back to life. Getting knocked out was starting to become a rather unpleasant habit, even more since we arrived at Neighborleans. This time, however, I knew perfectly how and why I had been put to sleep, and I had a certain idea of what I would be facing when I returned to consciousness.

I can't say that I totally grasped the implications of the card I had played by letting myself get trapped in the Curse. There was a calculated risk of not coming back, as there always had been since I left the Stable, but this time failing didn't mean death, it meant something far worse. Don't get me wrong, though, I did fear death. I always have. However, after having been shown the best and the worst of the Wasteland, I had learned to welcome death as something obvious, something of everyday, treated with respect instead of fear.

In retrospect, the endeavour I had chosen to undertake was a very high gamble... seeing Turner's fate (at least his replica's) made me shiver in angst. An eternity repeating the same three days, over and over again,

while at the same time being aware that he was trapped in that endless loop... what would happen to me, should I fail to stop Rarity? Would I be aware as Turner was, or would I be spared that punishment?

“Wake up, sleepyhead.” Turner’s voice echoed over the music. “It’s time we get moving.”

I opened my eyes to find myself lying on the floor of the same control room, but something had changed from the last time. Rust no longer formed stains on the metal walls, the ceiling wasn’t smeared by large stains of humidity, and the terminal we had used to communicate with Turner was working perfectly, showing graphs of power intake and output, device temperatures and maintenance warnings. However, the greatest difference was that Turner was standing in the middle of the room, in the flesh.

I got up as quickly as possible, while Turner looked at me with a satisfied smirk. I found it very understandable, as he had finally found somepony to try and break the Curse from the inside. After having been forced to wait for more than two centuries, that bit of Turner’s soul had a new chance of finding closure. I would have been happy in his situation.

“How was your sleep, mate?” He asked.

“Had better, had worse.” I replied diplomatically. “It seems that I’m already inside, right?”

“Right in the middle of the maelstrom, my friend. As you will be able to see, you’re in the Neighborleans of before the War, and everypony in this ‘world’ of ours is a victim of the Curse.”

“One question... are they all aware that they have been cursed, like you?”

“Oh no,” Turner laughed, “not at all! They got swallowed totally by the spell’s power, so their souls got totally bound to this here and now. They don’t realize what is really happening to them.”

“And can’t you let them know that they’re caught in a curse?” I asked. “In fact, why can’t YOU confront Rarity and break the spell yourself? After all, you do know everything about this.”

Turner lowered his eyes, looking at the floor in a mixture of shame and sadness.

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple, Farsight. Let me try to explain... in the real world, time is a linear flow. You’ve got your now, your before, your later. What you did before may affect what happens now or later, what you do now can affect what will come in the future. Simple laws of cause-effect, altered by a factor of chance, a pinch of randomness that is inherent to all processes in life. In here, though, things are a bit less linear and a bit more... wibbly-wobbly for me.”

“You just made up that word.”

“Maybe. The idea that I want to transmit is that, while I’m not bound to do the same things over and over, there are some other things that I am bound to do. For example, when the time for the spell comes, I will go to the HQ control room and I will ready my countermeasures. No matter what you do or what you tell me, I will be forced to do that. You, on the other hoof, are not bound yet. That’s why I’m counting on you to get this done.”

I breathed deep and nodded. It all made sense, after all. If the Turner I was speaking to was a byproduct of the spell, asking him to destroy that very spell would be like trying to undo the spell, like trying to turn back time. No, I had to break the Curse according to the flow of time in this alternate reality.

“Understood. Let’s get down to practical matters, shall we?” I asked.

“Of course, I was waiting for that.” Turner nodded. “But would you mind if we did that somewhere else? This room is starting to make me feel claustrophobic.”

“Sure.” I agreed, as I was starting to feel a bit oppressed as well. “Let’s get out of this place.”

“*Allons-y!*” Turner exclaimed, and started moving.

“Wait, what?”

“I said ‘let’s go’, but in the way they say it over here. So many years hearing the same language gets to you in the end.”

I shrugged as a response to Turner's funny behaviour. Once again, having been trapped in a two century-long endless loop could have some strange side effects, and who was I to judge them? As long as he proved to be helpful to me, I guess I could cope with a wacky companion. After all, not so long ago I was walking around with a psycho by my side.

I felt a funny sensation when I walked out the control room and witnessed the magnificence of the Transformer Station in its glory days. What I had seen as a large rusty and mouldy pool of swamp water was now a glistening clean hall of red brick walls, with large arched windows through which the bright sunlight poured into the building. The large electric machinery hummed harmonically, delivering power to all of the city, while a group of ponies in worker jumpsuits walked to and fro around the place, keeping everything in perfect working order.

"You seem surprised, Farsight..." Turner smiled. "What is it?"

"I could never have imagined this place would be of such... greatness. I had caught glimpses of it when we came here, but to see this... it makes me wonder."

"About what?"

"About how we could let ourselves destroy all of this. There's no excuse to losing all the work that has been poured into this place, and into many others, I suppose."

"Indeed, there isn't. You know, that's a question I have asked myself so many times... and yet, I can't find an answer."

"There are things that don't have an answer; and if they do, maybe it's better not to hear it."

"How deep." Turner smiled while he climbed down a ladder. "Now, don't let nostalgia grab you too hard. You know this isn't true at all; it's just an illusion."

"I know, although it's hard to accept." I sighed.

Turner's warning was no shot in the dark, for I had been partially blinded by the glory of the past... it was quite tempting to let yourself go and live forever in three days of magnificence and happiness, even if in the very deep you knew that it was all a lie, all fabricated by a ruthless spell. I had to be extremely careful while treading the streets of Neighorleans, for the risk of losing focus and forgetting my purpose was too high, and the temptations were very powerful.

During our last conversation, Turner and I had walked out of the Transformer Station and were standing on the cobblestoned road of a large avenue that led to the old town, with gardened estates built to each side of the street. The sun was on its zenith, and the blue skies shimmered in the damp heat. Unlike the post-War Neighorleans, which was damp, cold and murky; this pre-War city was hot, with the sun blazing upon us. The air kept being damp, as well as having had a slight hint of swamp smell, but it was distant and vague, not like the deep stench of the real Neighorleans.

Turner began to walk down the avenue towards the lively coloured houses of the Old Quarter, and I rushed to follow him. I needed his knowledge of the current situation, while he needed me as an agent to his intentions.

"Turner, how am I supposed to break the Curse?" I asked. "We've been talking about it in theory, but what am I exactly meant to do?"

"I can't give you a single answer about what to do, but the purpose is very simple. You must stop Rarity from casting the spell. How you do that is up to you, but be aware of one thing. Like me, she's a partial projection, so she's free to alter her actions. However, she will cast the spell in three days time, at midnight."

"I assume that she'll be heavily protected." I mumbled.

"Are you going to eliminate her?" Turner seemed surprised.

"What other alternative do you see?" I replied. "Casting the spell is a forced action, so I won't be able to talk her out of it. The only possible way I fathom is to take her out of the picture before she curses the city. We both know that she's a powerful magic wielder, so she would be able to use her powers to fight back or to

free herself from any kind of imprisonment. I don't want to take any risk, Turner."

Turner took a deep breath and looked to the floor, thinking. He sighed and shook his head.

"I see no other way either. However, something makes me feel bad about this... I swore to protect Equestria and its leaders, and look at me, conspiring to kill one of the Ministry Mares. It goes against all I fought for in life."

"But you know all of this isn't true. Shouldn't that help you assimilate it easier?"

"According to pure logic, it definitely should. However, it doesn't; so I guess it's become more of a matter of affection than one of logic."

"I think I can understand that, Turner. I can't ask you to do something that would hurt you, but I need you to promise that you won't interfere with whatever I intend to do. I don't want to get caught here forever, and less because of you."

I gave Turner a hard look to emphasize those last words. I had trusted him to the point of getting myself entangled in such a mess, and the last thing I needed was to have him hindering my work. I needed to make clear that he was an ally and not an enemy.

"Fine, Farsight." Turner sighed. "You are right. I can't ask you to do something and then start causing you trouble the moment after. However, I can't just stay by your side while you plot to kill Rarity. From now on, you are alone. Good luck, my friend, and may you do the best for all of us."

With those last words, Turner took a side street and left me on my own, thinking about how I was going to slay a Ministry Mare while surrounded by a myriad of guards. It was not going to be an easy task.

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It was the dawn of my first day in Neighborleans, seventy-two hours remained until the fateful moment of the Curse, the instant in which I would be freed or condemned forever. Dismissing the thought of a possible failure, I trotted calmly down the avenue towards the Old Town. I wanted to fetch some references to help me find my way through the city. My PipBuck was of no use to locate a single thing, because the locating system didn't work in the alternate reality of the Curse.

I managed to sneak into a building and climb onto the rooftop, and the sight of the world left me without breath for a second's time. The city spanned far and wide, almost into the horizon, with tall towers popping up every here and there. I could manage to recognize some landmarks I had already seen in the 'real' world, such as the Rising Sun Manor or the park in Harmony Hill, below which the suburb of Maretairie formed a peaceful community. For a moment, my thoughts flew back to Auntie Cheval. Would I meet her, pre-ghoulified, if I went all the way to her place?

Nonsense. I dismissed the idea as fast as it came, as it wouldn't help me at all in my endeavour. I needed to focus on the target at every minute. Getting sidetracked could mean my downfall.

My eyes moved from side to side, trying to locate a valid landmark to use as a starting point for my search. After all, first I needed to know where Rarity would be, and where she might be vulnerable to an attack. Of course, she would have already prepared herself against possible strikes; so it would become a true ordeal to take her down. To do anything, though, first I needed to move around town with ease.

"I never thought it could be so big..." I mumbled. New Pegasus and Freedom Field, together, could almost fit within the Old Quarter; or so it appeared to me.

After ten minutes of hectic search, my eyes found what appeared to be a large dome in an open space between buildings, down in the middle of the Old Town. A bolt ran through my mind... could that be the Town Hall? It looked like a good place to start searching for information, given that all the Governments handled information. I darted down the staircase and galloped down the avenue towards the designated target. I had not a single second to...

"Hey, you!" A voice called me from the side, making me freeze. "What's with the funny outfit?"

I felt shivers down my spine. I hadn't realized that I was wearing my armored Wasteland suit in a reality in which the megaspells were yet to hit, so ponies dressed properly in a civilized fashion. There was no way I could get close to Rarity without raising suspicion, dressed as I was. I looked at the unknown caller and found myself staring at a young buck in a casual outfit, a polo shirt and trousers.

"Well, I..." My mind struggled to craft a valid cover that could explain my outrageous attire.

"Oh, of course, I almost forgot it's Mardi Gras. I'm such a dumb buck!" He laughed, and I couldn't help laughing as well. Mardi Gras could be the perfect way of blending in.

"Yes, it's my Mardi Gras costume! You caught me off guard, that's all." I smiled, trying to hide my nerves; even if my heart was still beating like crazy.

"Well, it is one fine costume indeed!" The buck nodded. "It's based on that holomovie, right?"

"What holomovie?"

"That old blockbuster from around twenty years ago, 'Mad Mac the Road Warrior'!"

"Oh, you meant 'Mad Mac'!" I chuckled, even if I had no idea of what he was talking about. "Well, I guess it is. I wanted to dress as a Wasteland Raider, something from a dystopian future, you know; and this is what came out."

"It's a wonderful piece of work, you know? You should enter the grand costume contest. You might as well hit the big prize!"

"I need to give it a thought..."

"Trust me, you should. Just look at the details! That rifle is amazing... mind if I take a closer look?"

"Please don't." I couldn't afford having him know that the rifle was real. Just in case. "It took me a lot of work to build it, and I must say it's quite fragile... I prefer to handle it very carefully."

"Oh, OK." The buck winced, displeased. "Have it your way... anyway, I must be leaving. Good day to you, sir!"

"Good day to you too." I nodded and turned around, leaving the place as quickly as possible without appearing too hasty.

That had been simply pathetic, and I knew it. If I wanted to be inconspicuous enough to get close to Rarity, I couldn't just go crashing out of any harmless conversation, as if I had something to hide. I needed to calm down and think of a convincing story, something that would be regarded as logical in the context of the reality of the Curse.

My best choice was, obviously, to play a foreigner. I had no trace of the Neighorleans accent, and I couldn't risk to try and mimic it; as any local would spot it and flag me as a fake. The best lies are those that contain a big chunk of truth in them, so I decided that my cover story would have me be a Las Pegasus citizen coming to enjoy Mardi Gras. As there was a rather inconvenient War raging around, I had to consider that being a healthy young stallion, my place would be in the frontlines. Therefore, I also had to forge my way out of that situation.

Obviously, my best choice would be to say that I had been issued a permit to leave my battalion, permit which I had used to come to Mardi Gras? No, that was a rather weak explanation... I needed a better reason to explain why I was in Neighorleans. Suddenly, a flash went through my mind.

"Nadyr!" I mumbled. "He should be in this reality as well!"

He could be my perfect alibi. Being a local, as he had been born in Peekayune, he could pretend to have invited me to come and have a little meetup. Now I just had to find him, although I already knew it wouldn't be easy.

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After having invested almost all of the morning looking for my lost companion around town, I decided to

stop for a meal and something to drink. I had been walking up and down the streets of Neighorleans, searching for that one half-zebra that I had gone missing a day ago, in another different reality; but I hadn't been lucky.

What I had noticed, though, was that even if everypony tried to maintain the festive feel, one could feel the dread and deep worries that the War caused upon the population. Most of the ponies I came across in the streets were colts and fillies, or old and weary stallions that couldn't stand without the help of walking aids. There were some young mares and stallions here and there, but beneath their pretended happiness I could see the damages of conflict: the buck dressed as a scarecrow had a funny walk, probably caused by a bullet wound to the leg; the mare dressed as a bride hid the crystal eye that replaced the one lost by an explosion; the pegasus that strolled over the park wouldn't fly again, as one of his wings had been crippled by shrapnel.

The city and its inhabitants, though, were making a heavy effort to hide all that gloom, by competing in having the prettiest storefront, the biggest garlands, the shiniest flags or the best costumes. I did admire that perseverance, though, as sad as it could be. It showed the will to live and to outlast that the ponies had; as well as the hope that drove them forward. Even if I knew that it was futile, I couldn't help feeling a little hint of sympathy for them.

The restaurant I had entered offered local cuisine and low prices, and as one could think, was a little bit of a hellhole. The windows hadn't seen a clean wet cloth in weeks, the tables were old and clunky, the plates and trays were dirty and cracked, and the whole place reeked of not having been cared for properly. I had chosen the place because, in that reality, I was effectively broke. Maybe I would be able to barter some of my belongings for food, but I highly doubted that would work.

"Of all the places in the world I could find you, and you come here." A familiar voice spoke behind me, making me turn around and see a well known half-zebra looking at me with a face of smug satisfaction.

"Nadyr, you son of a..." I grunted, remembering how he had left us aside, but then I decided to hold back my anger and show a happy face. "Am I glad to see you!"

"Me too, bro." Nadyr got close to me and pushed me towards a table where a plate of stew was cooling down on. "I suddenly found myself in... here, in this... I don't know how to call it."

"Is that yours?" I said, pointing at the plate of stew.

"Yes, why?"

"Because I'm feeling rather hungry now, Nadyr." I looked at him with irony. "And I just don't know where on Equestria to get the money I need to pay."

"That's no problem!" Nadyr smiled broadly. "I've opened a tab in this place. Of course, I don't intend to pay... not that I have the feeling that I'll be forced to do it anyway."

"That's smart and cunning, I like it!" I smiled as well.

"So, fancy some stew? It's not half bad, despite the looks of the place."

"I could eat a griffin right now."

"Then they'll cook you a griffin!" Nadyr laughed coarsely. "Just kidding, bro. I'll get you a serving, give me a minute."

Nadyr whistled to get the waiter's attention and made a sign with his forehoof. The waiter, a silvery colt, nodded and trotted into the kitchen, returning shortly after with a plate full of the smoking stew. He left the plate on the table with a soft knocking sound and wished me a nice meal.

"Put this on my tab, boy!" Nadyr waved the waiter goodbye and took a mouthful of the stew. "Tasty."

I did the same, almost burning myself alive from the inside out in the process, and the taste of fresh vegetables almost made me cry in joy. Nothing I had eaten before in my whole life felt so clean, so natural... even if I had gotten used to it, the aftertaste of contamination and decay was present in every single food or drink in the Wasteland. This was how vegetables must have tasted before everything got destroyed... Too bad

it was just an illusion.

“You seem to be enjoying it, Farsight.” Nadyr smiled.

“I most certainly am.” I nodded and took another bite.

“I told you the food was good!”

“Yes, yes, chastise me all you want for not trusting you.” I laughed dimly. “You should know me by now.”

“Of course, of course.” Nadyr stretched his neck slightly and looked at me with a worried face, letting me know he was changing subject. “I don’t know what the hell is going on, Farsight, but I don’t like it... wasn’t this supposed to be a ruin?”

“It was.” I nodded. “What happened to you?”

“I don’t know!” Nadyr shrugged. “I just stopped to have a little nap, just to do the final stretch towards the Manor, but then I woke up and the world had returned to... normal!”

“The Curse caught you.”

“The what now?” Nadyr looked at me with a very puzzled face.

“The Curse. Don’t you remember Maretairie? The story they told us about everypony here dying instantly?”

“Oh yeah!” Nadyr stomped the floor to emphasize. “That story! Honestly, I thought it was all bullshit.”

“Well, now you know it wasn’t; because the two of us have been caught in it.”

“Caught? Is there a way of getting out?”

“There is, but it’s not that simple. We need to stop Rarity from casting the spell that cursed Neighborleans.”

Nadyr winced.

“How are we even supposed to do that? It’s not like we’ll be able to walk to her and ask her kindly not to fuck up the entire city, right?”

“Right.” I shook my head and shrugged. “Rarity will not reason with anypony and will not bend to any kind of barter...”

“So we have to stop her the bad way.” Nadyr finished, and I nodded. “Well, tell me how to kill a Ministry Mare in the middle of a flurry of guards!”

“That was what I have been trying to work out...” I said, and I decided to make things clear with my companion, “as well as finding you, you dickhead. Are you out of your damn mind?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Nadyr frowned. “Why have you become so mad now?”

“Give me a fucking reason to leave me and Rose alone in the Bank!” I grunted. “You stole the boat and left us stranded there!”

“Well...” Nadyr babbled, trying to find some valid explanation. “I woke up from the shock before you two, and since you seemed to be completely out of commission, I decided to go scouting by myself. The computer spoke about Rising Sun Manor, on top of the hill, so I thought I could go check it out. With a pinch of luck, you would be still down by the time I came back!”

That was the lamest explanation I could have expected, but in the very deep, I knew that Nadyr’s greed would force him to do stuff like that. You can’t blame the wind for blowing, so I had to admit that I should have seen that coming.

“Honestly, I am rather mad at you, Nadyr. You put yourself in danger, as well as risking our lives. We managed to find a way out of the office you left us in, and luckily, we didn’t run into any more trouble, but think about it: what would have happened if you wouldn’t have been able to return?”

Nadyr grumbled something, behaving like a young colt being reprimanded; but then lifted his head and nodded.

“Point taken, Farsight. As usual, you’re right.”

“It’s not about being right or wrong, Nadyr. We’re working as a team here; that’s the only way we’re getting the Gold and returning home in one piece.”

“Of course, of course.”

I could feel Nadyr’s displeasure at my constant speech about teamwork and mutual good will, so I decided to steer the conversation on a different direction. Nadyr had been inside the Curse for more time than I had, so he might know more about the things going on in town.

“Nadyr... you wouldn’t happen to know where Rarity will be in the next days, would you?”

“Sorry, bro. The folks here are quite silent, given the fact that there are some unwanted individuals strolling around the place... namely Ministry of Morale goons. Butchers with a license plate, I tell you. I’ve been questioned twice just for being a half-zebra.”

“And what did you tell them?”

“That I live in Peekayune and that I had come to enjoy the celebrations of Maredi Gras! That’s the most credible thing I can tell them!”

Smart, Nadyr, smart. He had been thinking about his cover as much as I had.

“Of course,” he continued, “the celebrations’ schedule is unclear and cryptic, so that nopony can anticipate where Rarity might appear. Everypony believes that she’s lodged in the Rising Sun Hotel, since the place is like a damn fortress. I tried to take a sneak peek around it, but I couldn’t even get close to the outside fence! Guards are just everywhere!”

“I see...” I mumbled, worried. If we couldn’t even know where to strike, we had absolutely nothing to do. Suddenly, a risky idea went through my mind.

“Uh-oh. You’ve come up with something, I see it in your face.”

“You said that Pinkie’s bucks are everywhere, right?”

“That’s what I said, yeah. What are you implying?”

“We know that you’re suspicious for being a zebra, so you will draw their attention. I’m assuming that the MoM goons must know when Rarity will appear, in order to protect her and ensure her safety. Therefore, if we can grab hold of the documents of any of those guards, we should be able to plan a strategy.”

“Sounds good, but I don’t like where you’re going.”

“Any better idea?”

Nadyr puffed and grunted.

“No.”

“It’s settled then. Leave the restaurant and wait on the side street. Be ready for some combat.”

“If anything goes wrong, I’ll make you pay, bro. I swear.”

“Come on, trust me. When have my plans gone wrong?” I smiled smugly.

Nadyr sighed and walked out of the restaurant at a steady pace, while I got close to the bar and called the waiter for a bit of privacy. When the silvery young buck came close, I did my best impersonation of Turner’s attitude when being ‘official’ about his assignments.

“What is it, sir?” the waiter asked.

“Keep it down, boy. Agent Sight, Equestrian Military Intelligence Service. I need your help. You’ve seen the zebra I’ve been having lunch with? He’s an enemy spy, conspiring against the Government. I’ve been playing a double agent, promising him some information on our Army plans, and I’ve arranged for a meeting on the side street. Do me a favor and call some Ministry of Morale agents to back me up. Do it quick, son, because I

need to be there soon, or he'll begin to suspect me!"

The waiter nodded with a worried face and darted out of the front door of the restaurant. I calmly left the place, taking a detour in order to give some advantage to the waiter and the guards. The plan was to ambush them in the backstreet, after all.

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"May I see your papers, sir?" The voice of an unknown pony came from around the corner. I took a peek to see Nadyr surrounded by two stallions in long black trench coats and hats. Obviously, the idea of 'blending in' didn't appear to be a priority to them.

"Gentlecolts, this is absurd." Nadyr replied, playing the role of the disgruntled citizen.

"Shut up!" The farthest buck barked. "Papers, now!"

"I don't understand this." Nadyr shrugged. "I am a loyal citizen of Neighborleans."

"Don't play with our patience, Zebra scum. Where are your damn papers?"

Nadyr stomped the floor in anger.

"So that's it, right?" He huffed. "It's all because of my stripes. It doesn't matter that I've been loyal to the Government in Canterlot, it doesn't matter that I've paid my taxes, it doesn't even matter that I took a bullet for the country in Hill 466!"

Hill 466? I had to admit that I had no idea of what he was talking about, but he had a natural talent for acting.

"Hill 466?" The two MoM goons looked puzzled.

"Yes, Hill 466! Of course, you can't know where it is, because you've got your muzzles so deep in your asses that you don't even see daylight!"

"Be careful about what you say, you bastard." The closest goon clenched his teeth. I readied my rifle, because I had the feeling that things could get rough any minute.

Nadyr flinched lightly and bowed.

"Sorry, officer. I know you're on duty, but there are some times that this poor war veteran feels a little mistreated by his nation. Could you at least tell me why I'm being questioned now?"

One of the goons, who seemed to be the leader of the two, sighed deeply; as if moved by Nadyr's sudden burst of alleged honesty.

"I am sorry, but I can't tell you. Please, let me see your papers and let's get this over with."

"Of course..." Nadyr gave in. "Just let me find them."

Nadyr started searching in his pockets and saddlebags, with the two goons looking closely. Since I doubted Nadyr had any valid papers, it was the time to act. I readied my gun and checked if S.A.T.S. was active. Unluckily for me, it wasn't, so I would have to do things the hard way. I aimed at the closer goon and took a deep breath.

**BLAM!**

The hollow bullet tore a hole of the size of a tennis ball in the head of the MoM guard, spraying blood, bone and brain matter all around the small side street. The second goon unholstered his gun, getting ready to fight. Sadly for him, Nadyr was a much faster gunslinger.

**BANG!**

A single shot at point-blank range ended with the life (or illusion of life) of the second goon. I trotted at my companion and put away my gun.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"I'm fine, don't worry." Nadyr boasted. "I could have taken them down myself, but thanks for the help."

“You can stop acting now, Nadyr.”

“Are you implying I couldn’t handle them alone?”

“Honestly, I don’t think you would have been able. Still, what’s done is done. Let’s take a look and see what we can find.”

As fast as we could, we started scrounging around the corpses of the two dead goons. We knew that the noise of the shots would bring everypony to the small side street, so we needed to hurry up.

“Any luck?” Nadyr asked. “This one isn’t carrying anything.”

“This one doesn’t seem to... wait a minute.”

I had found a small note in a back pocket of the coat. A closer look of it revealed that it was a timetable for the security operations in the coming days, which gave us a rather good hunch about when Rarity might appear in public. I couldn’t help to smile broadly.

“What is it?” Nadyr came close.

“Look at this. It seems that there is a grand parade taking place this afternoon, and then there are no great things going on until the opening party of the hotel. My guess is that these are the times in which Rarity will be seen, and therefore when she will be vulnerable.”

“A parade, huh? Will the Ministry Guards be expecting a sniper?”

I smiled at Nadyr’s remark.

“I guess they won’t. Still, let’s not be overconfident. I don’t want to get gunned down here.”

“Neither do I.” The half zebra shook his head. “What do we know about the parade?”

“It will go down Buckbon Street from 4 to 7 PM, which means that we have an hour to get set and find a proper place to set up our attack. Let’s hide the corpses and get moving!”

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After having hidden the dead ponies in a convenient dumpster full of trash, we hurried for a rooftop that gave us a clear vantage point over the Parade. Sadly for us, they were definitely expecting a sniper. Pegasi patrolled the sky in regular intervals, and most of the entrances to the buildings around Buckbon Street were heavily guarded. It wouldn’t be as easy as we had thought, not by far.

The music coming from the distance let us know that the parade had already started, and that we had to move as fast as possible not to miss our chance. Galloping along the backstreets, we tried our hardest to find a doorway we could sneak into. Finally, we found an unguarded back door close to Dumane Street... our only worry would be the pegasi patrols keeping an eye from above. Once on the rooftop, we hid under a convenient water tower. That would keep us away from the pegasi, but it hindered my line of sight.

“Are we ready?” Nadyr asked.

“As ready as we can be.” I sighed. “I don’t think I’ll get a clear shot from here, but I don’t want to be gunned down by those winged cops.”

“Me neither.” Nadyr laughed ironically. “We’ll have to do with this... by the way, what happened to Rose?”

“Rose? She might be cursed as well, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“How so?”

“Apparently, those ponies with a greater magic skill are less vulnerable to the Curse, which will make them stay for a longer time in the ‘real’ Neighorleans. Those with less ability will get sucked faster into the ‘fake’ Neighorleans. Rose, teamed up with Lavender, is by far the most powerful magic caster of the three, so I would put my caps on her being in the ruined City, while we’re dilly-dallying around in this illusion.”

“I see. Now, would you mind explaining how you found out about that?”

“It’s a long and complicated story, so bear with me.” I began to tell Nadyr about how I had met Turner, how he had told me about the Curse and about how to end it from the inside. The half-zebra’s face showed his surprise and disbelief about the things I was telling him.

“No disrespect meant, Farsight, but that’s just bananas.”

“It’s our best bet, Nadyr. I know it sounds bonkers, but I don’t have any better idea about how to return to our beloved, post-Balefire reality.”

“Tell me something, bro. What will happen if we fail to do whatever we’re meant to do?”

“Apparently, we’ll get trapped in this illusion forever. Three days after three days after three days, and so on.”

“That means we’ll know that we’re trapped?”

“I don’t know about that end. I don’t want to know either.”

“Of course…” Nadyr let go a sigh of dismay. “Let’s concentrate on taking the Mare down, shall we?”

I nodded and readied my trusted sniper rifle, trying to find the best angle of fire while keeping safe under the water tower. I grunted, because I had almost no line of sight with the ground, so it would be a one-shot chance only.

“This won’t work.” I mumbled.

“Well aren’t you a natural optimist.” Nadyr snickered.

“You’d better start thinking about a different way of getting to her.” I gave Nadyr the note with the timetable, and I concentrated on the telescopic sight of my rifle.

The brass band music became louder as the parade got close to our location. Crowds of ponies dressed up in the most different costumes walked along the celebratory chariots, while the musicians played a quick tune, encouraging the viewers to dance to the beat. I tried to keep the aim steady as a chariot representing the glorious Army of Equestria passed through my sights.

“Where is she?” I grunted in anger. My muscles were starting to get cramped, and getting the crosshairs to stop moving was an ever greater ordeal.

“Still no luck, Farsight?” Nadyr asked from behind, his head stuck in the timetable. I couldn’t believe it was taking him so long to find a possible opportunity.

“Nope.” I mumbled. “I don’t think I’ll be able to hold much longer. This position is too uncomfortable.”

“Don’t give up just yet. She should be about to appear.”

Suddenly, right after Nadyr had said those words, a chariot symbolizing the Elements of Harmony appeared on my sights, and Rarity was on top of it. For a moment, I was awestruck by her otherworldly beauty. Her white coat glistened in the bright sun of the Bayou, and her spotless purple mane curled itself with grace and elegance with every move she made. A perfectly fitting red dress made her shine like a star on top of the chariot platform.

“Bro, isn’t that Rarity?” Nadyr asked.

“In the flesh…” I mumbled, trying to find a clear shot. As hard as I forced myself, though, I couldn’t stabilize the sight. The tension and the wait had left my body slow and my magic weakened, and the chariot moved too fast for me to lock onto Rarity. Besides, a missed shot would attract the attention of everypony in town. I couldn’t risk it, not that much at least.

“Farsight! She’s getting away!”

“Aww, fuck it!” I tossed the rifle to the floor and let myself fall, exhausted. I rolled to my back and looked at the low end of the water tower. Stains of moisture appeared all along the wooden planks, and the striped face of Nadyr looked at me from above, with a face of incredulity.

“Why didn’t you shoot, bro? Don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love.”

“No, it’s not that. I couldn’t get a clear shot, and my body felt too heavy to respond properly. I didn’t want to miss, because then we’d have a hard time getting away from all the police in town.”

“Fair enough. I just hope we don’t have to regret this missed chance.”

“Well, that depends. Have you found a way of getting close to her?”

“I might have.” Nadyr smiled. “At first I thought in the Opening Party, but her appearance will be only five minutes long. I guess that’s when she’ll cast the spell.”

“That’s a no-go.” I shook my head. “Too risky, we can’t just play a single card. There must be another way.”

“Well, apparently there is a private party taking place before the official opening, but you will need an invitation to get in there.”

“Any idea on how to get one?”

Nadyr shrugged and made a face of not giving a single fuck.

“Beats me. I guess, though, that if it’s a private party and Rarity is involved, it will mean glamour and glitz.”

“Quite reasonable... now, where do all the glamorous ponies go in Neighorleans?”

“You might be interested to know that there is a rather fancy Casino downtown, close to the Bank. That would be a good place to start looking, wouldn’t it?”

Good old Nadyr could make some bright remarks every now and then. Indeed, a Casino of a certain prestige could be a magnificent place to look for an invitation. I still didn’t know how I was going to do that exactly, but I had good vibrations. I couldn’t help smiling broadly, and I let go a laugh of relief.

“Those are great news, Nadyr! Will they let us in looking like this, though?”

“Well, it’s Mardi Gras.” Nadyr huffed. “I guess there’s no harm in trying.”

“Also, what about the money? We have nothing in this reality!”

“That’s where you’re mistaken, my friend!” Nadyr smiled, and took out a large wallet from his saddlebags. “I nicked this from one of the dead goons. Seems like it had just been pay day, this thing is stuffed.”

The wallet was, indeed, almost full with different notes and coins. A lot of money for a goon, unless the MoM paid its employees in cash. Not that I worried too much, though. We needed money, and we had found money.

“Not a minute too soon!” I got back up with a hop. “Let’s go play our cards, shall we?”

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Right where Nadyr had told me, I found myself staring at the immense Grand Casino of Neighorleans. The building radiated elegance and class from each and every block that had been used to build it. The long archways and large windows with carefully crafted glass panels spoke of glory and opulence, the thick rugs that covered the floors welcomed each newcomer with their softness and warmth. The constant mumbling of ponies playing and croupiers dealing was muffled by the tapestries in the walls, that depicted imagery of classic elegance and aesthetic beauty.

I was used to being in casinos, such as the Four Little Diamonds in Freedom Field, but unlike the ones in Neighvada, this place was welcoming and likeable. I didn’t have to fear being shot in the back by a rival gang goon; although I had the feeling that the same level of foul play was involved in there, just with a bit more of subtlety.

Nadyr and I walked along the foyer of the Casino, a two-leveled round room that was lit by the sunlight that sipped from a crystal dome in the roof, as well as by four chandelier lamps that hung from the ceiling. Two symmetric staircases of dark wood and gold coating connected the upper and the lower level, and the walls were covered in patterned wallpaper in gold and bronze colors. Suddenly, a liveried butler called our

attention.

“Excuse me, gentlecolts...”

“What’s wrong?” I asked, acting surprised.

“I’m afraid to tell you that your looks don’t exactly fit our dress code. I will have to ask you to leave.”

I looked at myself rather theatrically, moving the head up and down along my flanks. Then I composed a smile of shame and shrugged while laughing dimly.

“Oh, you mean this... I thought it was Maredi Gras!”

“Well, sir, it is indeed... but this establishment takes great pride in its class and elegance. We can’t do any exceptions.”

“Why, that’s too bad!” I whined. “I’m a soldier on a permit with a nice amount of money to gamble with, and I can’t just because I came dressed up for Maredi Gras? Can’t you do something about it?”

The mention of money made the butler’s attitude change, even if he tried to hide it from us. He became a bit less distant than before, and started acting friendly and willing to help.

“I think there might be something... if you wish to come with me, I shall provide you of adequate attire.”

“I knew we could find a solution.” I smiled and nodded.

“Follow me, please.” The butler turned around and climbed the stairs to the upper floor.

We walked down a maze of corridors after the Casino butler, leaving the main gambling halls aside, until he stopped at the door of a small room that was marked as ‘storage’. When we were close enough, he opened the door and entered the room, telling us to follow him. Once inside, we noticed that they were using the place as a cloakroom, since it was full of suits, coats and other garments. With class and determination, he picked up a couple of elegant suits and gave them to us. After that, he left the room to give us a bit of privacy.

“Good move.” Nadyr smiled in relief. “For a moment I thought he wouldn’t let us in.”

“Greed is a powerful motivator.” I answered, while struggling with the tie. “He couldn’t risk losing the chance of getting more money into the casino.”

Once suited and ready to go, we left our stuff in a corner of the room and followed the butler back into the main hall of the elegant casino. Gentle music flowed in the halls, while soft lights coming from chandelier-like lamps projected dancing shadows on the mustard-colored walls. The soft red and gold rugs that covered the floors were warm and welcoming to the touch, rustling gently as we walked on them.

“Excuse me.” I tapped the butler’s back to get his attention.

“What is it, sir?” he answered solicitously.

“Well... I have heard many rumours of a grand party taking place in the Rising Sun Hotel, prior to the grand opening. Is that true?”

The butler doubted about what to answer. Obviously, he didn’t want to say it openly, because the celebration was meant to be secret; but he couldn’t just deny it. It was a lie too blatant to hide.

“Well...” he stuttered.

“Come on!” I smiled gently. “It will be our little secret. After all, it’s common word out in the streets. No pony admits or denies it, but every pony speaks about it.”

“All right, sir. There is, indeed, a special celebration for a private group of attendants.”

“And you won’t happen to know of any way of getting an invitation?”

“Not at all, sir.” The butler’s reply sounded stiff and fast. He was hiding something.

I grabbed the wallet and picked out a hundred bit note, sliding it carefully into the butler’s pocket. I smiled and winked in complicity.

“I can’t believe that a well-informed pony like you has no idea about how to get an invitation.”

“Well, sir, all invitations have been given away; but...”

“I knew there was a but.” I smiled.

“Indeed, sir. I meant that there is one invitation owner that has been playing all day in the casino, with a perplexingly good luck... or maybe savoir faire.”

“Would you mind pointing me to that individual?”

“Of course, sir. It’s the light grey stallion in a black tuxedo playing at the Poker table.”

“Thank you!” I nodded in gratitude. “One last thing... would you mind giving us chips?”

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The poker table was a world of its own, almost separated from the rest of the casino by a clever setup of divider screens with elegant patterns. A bar of its own allowed the gamblers to get their fixes without having to leave the area, and the lower lamps surrounded the table in a convenient layer of shadows. Even the music and the voices from the outside sounded to be really far away.

Five ponies surrounded the table, six if you took the croupier into account; as well as their entourages, who watched from a safe distance. Mares with expensive gowns, distinguished looking stallions... and my target, the tuxedo-wearing stallion. He was different to the rest of the players. He belonged there, a casino table seemed like his habitat, judging by the way he acted and by the pile of chips he had accumulated; but there was something alien about him... as if he lacked the class of the other gamblers. He seemed rougher, smarter, more dangerous.

“I’d like to join.” I said to the croupier.

“Of course. Small blind is 25 bits, big blind is 50 bits.” His reply was mechanic, as if he had been saying it for ages. I had 6000 bits in chips, so I had my good chances of battling my way for an invitation.

“Count me in.” I dropped a chip in the center of the table and made myself comfortable. Cards started flowing from the pack into the players. A seven and a queen, not bad to begin with. I pushed another chip and began to watch my opponent closely. He didn’t show any kind of emotion while playing, but he did seem to pay attention to me; as if the rest of the players were nothing more than a nuisance.

“New in town?” he asked, out of the blue. He spoke in a Trottingham-like manner, but with a funny accent.

“Why, yes.” I answered calmly.

“What’s your shtory?” Well look at that, the tuxedo buck had a lisp.

“Nothing too fancy, really.” I smiled gently, trying to appear humble, in order to make him lower his guard.

“I’m just a veteran on a permit.”

“Well, to be a shimple war veteran, you’ve got a juicy wallet. You don’t shee many of thoshe theshe daysh.”

“I’ve been saving it for a rainy day, but by the looks of things, I won’t be able to use it in a long time, so I might as well have some fun with it.”

“Of courshe.” The buck showed genuine interest. Could that mean that he was aware that I was really new in the Curse? “What’s your name, shon?”

“Farsight. And yours?”

“Call me Conneighry. Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine.”

Meanwhile, the croupier had dealt the three first cards; a five, a three and a queen. Good, that gave me a pair to play with. Carefully, I raised the bet to force others to move and take contenders out of the picture. Suddenly, one of the mares went all in, which caused a sudden gasp of surprise among the audience. I noticed that Conneighry didn’t even flinch, though. He pushed all his chips into the middle, and took a sip of his cup

without much interest. I didn't want to lose all the chances at my first move, since my opponent had reacted with such calm to an all-out attack. He had to be ready for whatever may come, so I folded. Other two players went all in as well, and the remaining one folded.

"What a blunt move." Conneighry grimaced, looking at me. Did he nod at me? "More cardsh, pleashe."

The croupier dealt the remaining two cards, which happened to be two aces. I couldn't hide the eagerness I had for the players to unveil their hooves, just to see who won. I had a hunch, though, and that was Conneighry.

"Two fives." The mare that had started the all in frenzy left her cards on the table. "That makes three of a kind."

"Aww, I had two threes."

"Nothing, I thought it was a bluff."

Only Conneighry had his cards hidden. I tried to find a hint of emotion in his face, but he showed no trace of them. He seemed to be carved in stone, and he didn't even emote when he dropped his cards.

"Two acesh. That makesh four of a kind."

"Mister Conneighry has four of a kind." The croupier announced my opponent's victory, using his magic to shove the chips to his side.

"My, congratulations." I bowed humorously. "That was a masterful move."

"Not at all, shon. Jusht luck."

I couldn't help to believe that Conneighry already knew what would happen in this game, even if I had altered it. Going all in with only two of a kind, and then winning the hoof thanks to the last two cards... it was something more than luck, it was knowledge. Maybe his situation was similar to Turner's?

"Well, I've seen some lucky strikes in my hometown, but that... that was amazing."

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"Las Pegasus."

"Ah, Lash Pegashush. Not a bad place at all, to be honesht."

"I guess you've got to be a full-time gambler to pull out feats like that." I praised him, trying to get a glimpse of who he was. "I am sincerely amazed."

"Thank you, shon."

The croupier called possible new players to the table, but after Conneighry's last strike of luck, nopony dared to enter, not as long as he was around. After that, cards were dealt and another hoof began. I lifted my pair with care, and took a quick glance: a four and a five. Nothing fancy at all, I had little chances of winning, so I would have to fold.

"I fold." Conneighry announced, out of the blue. Once again, the audience gasped out of surprise.

"That was fast." I whistled lightly, showing my surprise.

"Shometimesh, one musht know when to shtep back." He smiled and looked at me in the eyes.

Suddenly, a flash went through my mind. He was meant to win that hoof once again, and he knew it! However, he had folded without even taking a look at his two cards. I was fully convinced that he was aware of being cursed, and that he knew which cards would be played in which hoof. I just needed to make sure that he wasn't playing with me; but once again, if he was a standard victim of the Curse, he wouldn't be able to mess with me, would he?

"A very reasonable attitude." I nodded and raised the bet.

Three cards flowed onto the table: a six, a king and a three. I kept having nothing, but I was just a seven

away of having a flush... was Conneighry's intuition right?

"Excuse me if I appear to be a bit too intrusive, mister Conneighry, but I believe to have noticed a certain similitude between your accent and the one spoken around Trottingham, am I right?"

"Yesh, you're right." He smiled. "I come from Trottingham, although I wash born in the high landsh."

"What a funny coincidence! I happened to meet a chap from Trottingham in the front lines. He was no soldier, he was more of a black ops buck, but he was fun to speak with, and had a bit of a loony personality."

"Did he?" Conneighry's attitude changed, even if very slightly. I was on the right path.

The croupier uncovered another card: a four, which gave me a pair... nothing too fancy, but I had the feeling that I had to push. I raised the bet even higher, forcing the remaining buck to equal it, but not high enough to make him fold.

"Yes, he was quite an individual!" I spoke without making eye contact with Conneighry. "I think his name was Turner. Of course, I lost him soon enough."

Conneighry flinched very slightly at the mention of Turner, what led me to believe that they knew each other. I assumed they were partners in Operation Masquerade, what meant that he was aware of him being cursed. Most probably, he had played in that table for almost two hundred years, so he knew each and every card played. The croupier lifted the last card; the required seven. At its sight, I went all in, followed by the other buck.

"Two pairs." He grinned, showing a five and a seven.

"Flush." I showed my four and my five. "I win."

"Flush beats two pairs. Mister Farsight wins." The croupier confirmed my victory, and Conneighry nodded lightly, as if he was acknowledging what he already knew.

"I guessh thish leavesh ush two alone."

"It does. Something to drink, Conneighry?"

"Why yesh. Vodka maretini, shaken, not shtirred." He waved a hoof to a nearby waiter to make his order.

"You, sir?" The waiter asked.

"Not for now, thanks. I like to play sober."

The waiter left the table and the croupier started dealing a new set of cards. My pair appeared to be rather interesting, a queen and an ace; but Conneighry seemed to know which cards would appear at every time. I didn't stand a chance against an opponent that controlled the game up to that point.

"Who are you really, Farshight?"

"Me?" I pretended to be surprised. "I'm a veteran..."

"Shpare the bollocksh. You can't be a veteran, there never wash a veteran in thish cashino."

"Really? Then who are you, to make such an assertion?"

Conneighry laughed, a sincere laugh for once. Then he relaxed and took a sip from the cup of maretini the waiter had promptly left on the table.

"I guessh thish ish a tie. Agent Conneighry, Equeshtrian Military Intelligence Shervice, but I think you already knew that; since you know Turner."

"Just as I believed." I smiled as well. "I am nothing but a scavenger from two centuries in the future, looking for the Gold hidden in Rising Sun Manor. Also, I'm trying to find my way out of this curse."

"Of courshe, you can't have one without the other."

"And for that, I need an invitation to the private party."

“Which I have.”

“And I was trying to gamble it away from you, but now that both our covers are blown, I feel a bit confused on how to handle this.”

“You won’t be able to beat me in this game. I’ve played it for two centuries. I know which card you will play.”

“Then, I guess it’s hopeless.” I shrugged and smiled. “Oh well, in that case, I believe we’ll meet again many times.”

“Not by any chance.” Conneighry grabbed a piece of paper from his saddlebag and shoved it to me. It was the invitation to the party, printed on thick paper with ornate letters.

“I thought you had sworn to protect Rarity. At least, that’s what Turner said.” I couldn’t help feeling surprised about his swift cooperation.

“I did, but my oath has tied me to this eternity. I don’t want it to go on forever, so if you can stop it, I’ll be grateful.”

“Fine then.” I picked the invitation. “It’s been a pleasure, Agent Conneighry.”

“Pleasure has been mine, Farsight. Godspeed.”

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The wait for the party in the Hotel went by very quickly. I kept on thinking on ways of approaching Rarity, but none of them seemed safe enough to ensure a proper strike. It depended greatly on whether I would have the chance of getting my guns inside the Hotel. I didn’t harbor many hopes, though, as it seemed too obvious. Still, it was worth trying; therefore, Nadyr and I headed to the Hotel in our Wasteland gear, pretending to be wearing Maredi Gras costumes.

The guard on the gate gave us a funny look when we tried to enter the Party, but the invitation was a powerful reason to let us in. With a mute grump, he opened the fence gate that led into the Manor grounds. The music could be heard from the outside, a local band playing a funky tune that invited to dance. We moved swiftly across the gardens and entered the Manor via the front door.

Inside, we found ourselves in a gleaming white lobby with tall, slender columns and tapestries hanging from the walls. Rich rugs covered the floors and the furniture showed great taste, being classical and yet trendy at the same time. In a corner of the room, the band filled the place with music, while all the ponies in the room danced; some dressed up in costumes and some in gala outfits.

“Beautiful place, eh?” Nadyr asked with amazement in his face.

“This could be heaven, or this could be hell.” I shrugged.

“No need to get all philosophic, bro.” Nadyr shook his head, and went to the bar.

While my companion got his fix of booze, I started scouting the place looking for Rarity. The glamorous Ministry Mare was nowhere to be found, but I could overhear her name in more than a single conversation. Obviously, all the folks in the room waited for her to appear, as she was the great protagonist of the event.

“Is she here?” Nadyr had returned with a cocktail in his mouth, which he had left on a nearby table.

“Not now, but I believe she’s in the building. We will have to wait.”

I tried to keep calm, but I felt my nerves slowly cringing with every tick of the clock. How much time did we actually have to take her out? Would it be a one-shot chance, like the one on the parade, or would we have room to plan things more thoroughly?

“Patience, Farsight.” Nadyr drank his cocktail and hiccupped. “You should have your chance.”

“I hope you’re right...” I sighed.

Suddenly, the crowd became restless. From the top of the main staircase, the sound of hooves against wood

let us know that somepony was coming. With a soft tune from the band, the Ministry Mare herself came down the stairs. Rarity kept looking as stunning as she did in the Parade, but this time she had changed dresses. Now she was wearing a tight black gown that made her curves show clearly. I couldn't help to feel a certain uneasiness down my rear half, and a plan started brewing in my mind. Risky, but which wasn't?

"My dear citizens of Neighborleans!" Rarity appealed her audience. "Isn't it great to be here!"

A wild cheer rose from the ponies on the lower floor, with hooves stomping the floor in glee. Rarity nodded with extreme grace in a show of gratitude.

"I would like to thank you all for completing this communal endeavour. We are living hard times, with a terrible war raging out there, so this place has an even greater value. Not so long ago, this was a happy nation; and thanks to that happiness we thrived. Now the horrors of conflict have tried to take that joy away from us, and we mustn't let that happen! This is a stone, a step in that direction, an act of bravery and defiance to tell our enemies that we won't give our happiness up!"

Another roar shook the building, as a myriad of ponies cheered Rarity's speech. The Ministry Mare nodded and smiled.

"So, tonight is a night to rejoice. Have fun and believe in our victory!"

With a bow and a gracious smile, Rarity ended her speech and trotted downstairs. It was my best chance to approach her, before she disappeared among the many ponies of the audience. Besides, she had to be aware of the Curse, just as Turner and Conneighry had been, so I could reasonably expect some curiosity on her behalf. Where that curiosity would lead me to, though, was a complete unknown.

"A delightful little speech, Minister." I approached Rarity trying to appear as distinguished and elegant as possible, despite my looks. "It surprises me that you're not being broadcasted to our troops out there."

Rarity stopped dead on her tracks and gazed upon me with her amethyst eyes. Her eyelashes fluttered beautifully up and down with every move of her eyes, while she evaluated me as something she hadn't seen before. Her face of surprise was genuine, as I had somehow expected.

"Why thank you, darling." Grace under pressure, that's what she showed. Rarity acted as if I was a pony she was actually expecting. "I'm not the one meant to do that. There are others with a far greater experience than mine in dealing with our armies."

"Still, I think you've been able to set the audience on fire, figuratively speaking." I smiled and bent my head to the side, while looking at her with my most seductive look. "We all know how grim the spirits are these days... your sight and your voice could help more than you think."

"My, my, what a charmer." Rarity giggled softly. "I don't think we've met before, mister..."

"Farsight, milady." I bowed. "Indeed, we haven't met. It's my true pleasure."

I kissed her forehoof very gently. Her fur was extremely soft and she smelled like paradise... if that was an illusion, I would try to enjoy it as much as possible.

"Milady, all the rumours about you are true... You are, indeed, an angel descended from the heavens."

Rarity blushed, her eyes shining in glee. Her ego was, probably, the best way to get to her; and that was the card I was meaning to play... to the very end.

"Oh, my... thank you, Farsight. You are really kind!"

"It's the least I can do." I looked down, pretending to feel ashamed. "I've travelled very long, and I've done a great effort to meet you in person and contemplate your unparalleled beauty. Now my life is complete."

"Have you? What did you do?"

"I'm just a humble trooper, a soldier that fights for this great nation against the Zebra enemy. For all my life, I've been listening to tales of your magnificence, and watching pictures that could only do you little justice. When I found out that you would be at the opening of this hotel, I fought to get a permit issued and invested a lot of money to travel from the frontlines to Neighborleans, just to be close to you. Now I can return to battle

with a sense of closure.”

Rarity blushed harder, and smiled broadly. Her immense ego didn't let her see through my charade.

“Those words are just flattering. How did you manage to get an invitation, though? I thought this was a private party, and I am pretty sure that you're not on the guest list, darling.”

“Oh, there's an easy explanation for that!” I laughed lightly, as if I didn't want to give it any importance. “Yesterday, I went to try my luck in the Casino. I take some pride in being a capable poker player, so I tested my skill at the table. I happened to meet a stallion there who had an invitation, and we gambled for it. Lady Luck decided that I was the one to attend the party, that's all.”

For a moment, I believed that Rarity would blow my cover, but she had apparently fallen for my gambit. She started checking me out carefully, with a hint of mischief on her expression.

“So you say you're a soldier, huh?” She grinned.

“Yes, milady. I don't want to die for my country, I want to make the zebra bastards die for theirs. I'm no hero, but I will fulfil my duty.”

“I don't doubt that, my dear.” Rarity was definitely checking out my flanks. I couldn't help feeling a little embarrassed, but things were going down the right way. “I like your costume, what is it exactly?”

“Oh, I inspired myself in the blockbuster ‘Mad Mac, the Road Warrior’. The aesthetics were quite unique and I wanted to mimic them... it was easy to get scrap plating from base, after all, it was good for nothing.” I shrugged. “And if you will allow me, milady, I love your dress. It makes you look mind-boggling.”

Rarity smiled maliciously, and I had an idea of what was going through her mind at the moment.

“Thanks, Farsight. Now tell me, what were your plans for the party?”

“Quite honestly, I had none. Or if I had, they're gone after having met you. I'm at your disposal, Minister.” That was the key line, the trap was set. Would she fall for it?

“Are you, soldier?” She giggled. “In that case, would you be interested in me showing you the Princess Suite of the hotel?”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

Rarity nodded and excused herself to the rest of the ponies close to us, then she looked at me and began climbing the stairs. I followed her closely, with a mixture of feelings in my inside. The plan was coming along properly, but at the same time I felt nervous like a foal in his first time. I should try to enjoy it, shouldn't I?

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The Princess Suite was larger than many apartments I had visited in Freedom Field. It was composed of three rooms; a living room, a small kitchen and the proper bedroom; all of them furnished with great taste and quality materials. One could think that there was no war going on, and that Equestria was in the middle of economic bonanza. The bedroom had a king size bed that looked tremendously comfortable, but I couldn't pay too much attention to the details because I was too focused on the gorgeous mare in front of me.

Rarity's black dress was lying on a corner of the room, as well as most of my Wasteland gear, and now I was looking at her glistening white body... a real treat to my weary eyes. I was standing almost naked as well, with my scarred blue coat showing to somepony different... why did I feel so strange? It wasn't my first time, after all...

“You seem worried, Farsight.” Rarity cooed gently. “What is wrong?”

“I'm just a little excited, that's all.”

“I can notice.” She giggled and her magic fondled my lower end, making me tremble. “Now, now, a little excitement is always good, isn't it?”

“Of course...” I kissed her on the lips, and our tongues entangled for a second that seemed to last forever. At

the same time, I used my magic to gently explore her body, applying pressure here and there, with care and curiosity at the same time.

“U-uhn...” Rarity moaned when my magic got to her rear end. “Ah, I knew you would get the hang of it quickly... Oh, Farsight...”

“I’m a quick learner, milady...” I gasped for a breath of air, trying not to succumb to the ripples of pleasure that went through my body. Rarity was a very powerful and resourceful magician indeed. She kissed me and stopped me from muttering any other word.

“Soldier...” she sighed. “Give me all you’ve got... it’s a direct order.”

She smiled and jumped to the fluffy bed, then she bent over and welcomed me to join her. I got close to her and kissed her gently on the nape while the two of us became one in a maelstrom of moans and gasps. Come to think of it, I was surprised that nopony noticed what was going on between us, since we hadn’t been precisely silent.

“That has been... ahn... amazing.” Rarity gasped.

“I know...” I smiled, still sweating and trying to catch my breath. She was distracted, and it was my chance to attack. “That’s what I’m told.”

“Cheeky little pony.” Rarity smiled and rolled to lie upside down on the bed, her legs bobbling back and forth as she tried to hold balance. I got on top of her and started massaging her with my magic. “Oh yes, keep doing that.”

I began on her tummy, and started climbing towards her breast and her neck... where my gentle massage turned into a tight grip. Rarity flinched and gasped for air.

“Wha-agh!” She cackled while trying to catch a breath of air. “Who...?”

“I’m Farsight, from the future, my dear.” I said, cold as ice. “Don’t take this too badly, I’ve enjoyed this affair with you, but I’ve got more pressing matters to attend, namely breaking out of this Curse of yours.”

“Th-future?” Rarity looked genuinely surprised, as she tried to breathe desperately. Her tongue was sticking out like a loose sock and her face was starting to look purple.

“Yes, the future!” I nodded. “I’m here for the Gold you hid beneath this house.”

“You’ll never...” She grunted, and her horn began to glow dimly. As a response, I tightened my grip.

“Sorry, my dear, but you’re not using your magic against me. Not anymore.”

“I... agh...” Rarity sighed and tried to shake me off, but I was too heavy. I could see desperation on her eyes as life dripped away from her, until she stopped moving beneath me. I caught a last glimpse of her dead body before everything went blurry around me.

A blink of an eye later, I was standing on top of an old mattress on a half-ruined room, back in the damp and murky Neighorleans of our time. A cold breeze made me shake, as I was fully naked and sweating like crazy. The exercise had drained me.

“I don’t want to know what you have been doing, Farsight.” Lavender’s sarcastic voice echoed in the large room.

I turned around to see the filly looking at me with a funny face, as if she experienced delight on watching me naked.

“Lavender... I’m glad to see you.” I said, and then my body gave up. I fell onto the mattress and closed my eyes for a little well-deserved sleep.

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It didn’t take me long to wake up again, and I found myself looking at my two companions, who were apparently waiting for me to return to the world of the living. I stretched my legs, shook my head and got up from the murky old mattress. I was still weary from the effort, but I felt good enough to go; so I picked up

my gear and started dressing up.

“I’m guessing you did have a good time, bro.” Nadyr chuckled.

“I did what had to be done, Nadyr.” I smiled. After all, he was right, I had had a great time.

“Sure thing, bro. Sure thing.”

“Oh, hi, Lavender.” I turned to the filly. “How did you make it here?”

“I’m not Lavender. I’m Rose.”

I took a look at her, amazed by the fact that I hadn’t noticed the change between the two personalities of the filly. The eyes weren’t as big as when Rose was in control, but they weren’t as small as when Lavender was up front. How would I be able to distinguish between the two now?

“Really?”

“Yes. Before you passed out, I was Rose as well. Before you ask, Farsight, Lavender spoke to me in the way to this place. To my surprise, she was reasonable and even a bit friendly. She proposed a truce, a treaty of mutual collaboration. I simply couldn’t believe it!”

“I know about that, she told me about it too.” I nodded. “It seems like you are taking over her, and not the other way around. Still, I firmly believe that you should give her a chance.”

“A chance? She’s a killing machine!” Rose whined.

“She is, but that facet of her personality is weakening more and more every time. In the end, it will be nothing more than a bad dream. However, the power she unleashes in you is something to be harnessed... Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know, Farsight... I can’t fully trust her.”

“Indeed, we can’t... yet. One day, she’ll bend to you, but for that, you must learn all you can about her. Who knows, you might find things in her that make you better and stronger.”

“If you say so, Farsight.” Rose frowned. “I don’t like it all that much, but there’s little I can do about it.”

“True...” I sighed.

I checked that all my gear was in place and got ready to search for the Gold. I was eager to get away from the swamps, after all that we had been through. We just needed to scavenge the place properly, because a large vault wouldn’t be all that hard to find.

“Let’s get moving, shall we? We’ve got a Vault to find.”

“About that...” Rose smiled. “I found it while you two were frolicking in the past.”

“Where?” I couldn’t hide my astonishment.

“Outside, close to the wall, there’s a loading gate that leads to a basement. I think they hid the door as a laundry service door. That would be the most logical place to get a motherload of gold into the building.”

“That’s very smart.” Nadyr whistled.

“Of course, what did you think?” Rose giggled and looked proud.

“Stop fooling around, you two. We’ve got a Vault to raid!”

We galloped all the way down to the outside of the Hotel, to the large door that led to the basement of the building. Indeed, it looked like a service loading chute, as if it could have been used to load coal in earlier times. Nadyr and I pried the door open, and to our amazement, we found an arcano-powered elevator platform right beneath it. We didn’t hesitate in getting onto the platform and pressing the button. The device hummed gently and started descending into the basement of the building.

We expected to find an old, dreary rock-walled basement, but we were surprised to find a room of futuristic feel, with working electric lighting, shiny titanium panels in the wall, and a large round armored gate on the

far end of the place. A terminal buzzed close to the Vault gate, and I headed quickly to it. I jacked the PipBuck to the input socket of the terminal, and began fighting the security protocols of the vault.

“OK, I’m fidgeting with the vault. Get ready for possible security measures popping up!”

“Security measures?” Nadyr asked. “Like what?”

An alarm began ringing in the room, and two turrets came out of the metal ceiling and began taking shots at us. I ducked behind the terminal and began to struggle with my PipBuck, trying to disable the automated defense systems before they took us down.

“Like those!” I roared. “Take cover!”

“Can you disable them?” Nadyr yelled.

“I’m trying!” I bypassed a level of security in my PipBuck screen. “But it will take me a while!”

“Don’t worry, boys, I got this.” Rose took a step forward and her horn glowed red. Suddenly, a sort of screen engulfed us and the beams from the turrets bounced away.

“Thanks, Rose.” I concentrated on the vault security, and after five minutes of struggle, the terminal beeped and the turrets hid in the ceiling.

“No problem!” Rose smiled.

“Where did you learn that, Rose?” Nadyr asked, surprised.

“It’s one of Lavender’s tricks. Helpful, isn’t it?”

“Very helpful, thank you. Now, let’s open this vault!” I was eager to see what was waiting behind the shiny gate.

With my magic and Rose’s combined, as well as Nadyr’s physical strength, the large metal door opened with a low pitched groan. We dashed into the holding chamber, and what we saw left us awestruck. A wheelless cart was standing on the middle of the room, holding a pile of ingots of shiny gold; all for us to take.

“Goddesses...” I gasped.

“That’s a lot of gold.” Nadyr mumbled.

“How are we going to take it back?” Rose asked.

I had to admit that she had a good point. All that gold was too heavy to carry on a boat. I checked the cart closely and noticed that it had an arcano-powered circuit on the lower end. I concentrated on the cart and my magic powered the systems on the machine. The cart began floating at some distance above the ground.

“It’s an anti-gravity cart! That’s how they brought it here!”

“Can we use it to take it back to the teleporter?” Nadyr asked.

“If it doesn’t sink on water, we’ll be fine.”

I steered the cart to the platform, and the three of us got back on ground level via the elevator. After that, I drove the cart to the edge of the water, with the three of us clumsily standing on top of the piles of gold.

“Here goes nothing...” I whispered and prayed to the Goddesses while I drove the cart onto the water.

It floated. More properly, the anti-gravity system kept us at a safe distance above the water surface. The three of us sighed in relief and got ready for the trip back to Maretairie. After such a long journey, we wanted to return home.

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Harmony Hill wasn’t empty, as we had expected it to be. When I drove the cart uphill, I noticed a pack of ghouls waiting beside the teleporter booth. I recognized Samedi and Cheval among the lot, but that didn’t make me any calmer. What had they come here for?

“Those are the Maretairie ghouls, right?” Rose asked.

“Yes... what do they want?” I mumbled, worried.

Cheval took a weary step forward and stood before the cart. Her expression, as far as I could make out, was of calm determination. What I couldn't understand was the reason why they were waiting for us. Did they want their share of gold?

“You're back.” Cheval's dry voice showed no surprise, just an assertion.

“Surprised?” I replied.

“Not really.”

“What do you want?”

“You broke the Curse, right?”

“We had to.”

“Congratulations.” Cheval seemed happy.

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. I guess you'll be returning home now, right?”

I looked at Cheval in the eyes, and I saw a threat. Somehow, those last words implied that they had something different in mind for us. I didn't like ghouls, and I liked them less when they meant to stop me. Without an instant of hesitation, I unholstered my rifle and aimed at Cheval's head. Our eyes met a last time, and... did I notice a slight nod of acceptance?

**BLAM!**

Cheval was blown away by the shot at short range, dripping ichor and black blood all over the grass of Harmony Hill. The rest of the ghouls stood on guard, caught by surprise by my unexpected attack.

“Farsight!!!” Rose yelled. “Why?”

I paid her no attention, and moved on to the next target. Nadyr had also picked his gun up and was aiming at another ghoul.

**BLAM! BANG! BLAM!**

We just needed a couple of minutes to get rid of the pack of rotten pony-had-beens. I jumped down from the cart and checked if any of them was still alive, but none of them had survived the slaughter.

“Why did you kill them?” Rose roared. “They were unarmed.”

“They had no good intentions.” I replied dryly.

“How can you say that? You only spoke with them for a second!”

“They were in our way. Besides, there was something odd about the way Cheval spoke. They might be about to go feral... or maybe they had welcome it.”

“But how can you...?”

“Rose, it's done.”

Rose grumbled in dissatisfaction. I knew that she would take it badly, after all, she always thought that everypony's life was worth saving... Even if those ponies were rotten and bound to lose all trace of self-awareness. I didn't expect her to understand my actions, but they were decisions that I was forced to make.

“Rose...” Nadyr spoke calmly. “I didn't like them ghouls either. They were acting odd... not like the first time in Maretairie.”

“But Nadyr...”

“I know you're upset, but it had to be done.”

Rose grumbled once again, even if Nadyr had stood by my side. There wasn't much to be done about her, she did have a strong will. I started searching the bodies of the ghouls, but they carried nothing of value. Their saddlebags, however, could be used for something worthy.

“OK, folks! Let's put the gold in the saddlebags of the ghouls. We'll use them to carry the Gold home. It will be a tough journey, but it's the best way.”

Nadyr and Rose obeyed and began packing the gold in the bags. Once they were full, we distributed them according to our strength and picked them up. Heavily encumbered, but stinkingly rich, we walked into the teleporter booth. We just needed to get back to Freedom Field, and our fate would change... forever.

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Perk added: Goldeneye.

Your newly obtained riches make you a much more attractive pony. 25% gain in speech, charisma and attention from the opposite sex.

## Chapter 13: Money

*“Good morning everypony, this is Mister New Pegasus welcoming you to another day in the busy New Pegasus, the city that never sleeps! As always, the best records are constantly spinning in this, your favourite station, here to make your everyday life a bit brighter! We’ve been listening to Dino Maretino’s newest hit: ‘A hint of the Desert’! This young buck has a promising future in the music industry, I tell you! If anypony wants to listen to him live, the Clops Casino and Hotel will host his show every Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 10 PM. Don’t miss it!*

*Now, moving on to some news that should be of our interest... Freedom Field is becoming the stage of a daily dose of soap opera, friends. Ever since the broadcasts of pirate Radio Nowhere started airing, the relationships between the leaders of the gangs in our neighboring township have suffered a constant bombardment. The last report aired by this illegal station spoke of a confirmed infidelity from Saddle Buckmare, who had been allegedly been caught in the act of having sex with two of his hookers. As a responsible and sensible radio station, we don’t give credibility to such gossip, but...*

*Bzzt...Wheee...Click!*

*This is Radio Nowhere, is there anypony alive out there? Ahh, we’re on air, and it feels so good! Get ready for your daily dose of Freedom Field gossip, everypony! The news nopony dares to air, we will bring them to you!*

*Now, where were we? Oh yes, more on the Golden Swallow infidelity scandal, or how people call it, Goldie’s getting Buckmared! Remember how we told you that Saddle Buckmare had been caught with his willy in one of his hookers? Well, he’s done it again! This time, he’s been careful enough to do it inside the comfort of his own Casino, but in the heat of action, he forgot to lock the door! Goldie’s the target of more than one joke in the streets of Freedom Field, and while we’re sorry about her, we can’t help enjoying the show!*

*Because that’s what it is... a real show! Goldie’s been acting like crazy, and her escalations of rage are close to reaching a legendary level! She’s broken all ties with Saddle Buckmare and his gang... which leaves other doors open!*

*Doors like the one of the Tesla Bar. Word in the streets says that there is a certain feeling between the ever mysterious Ampera von Ohm and our hero of the day, Saddle Buckmare. There’s still little to say about this fact, but it’s becoming a recurrent tale on the streets, so we’ll keep an eye on it!*

*This was Radio Nowhere, stay tuned! Back to boring Mister New Pegasus!*

*Bzzt...Wheee...Click!*

*Me, boring? I’ll show that bastard... what? On air again? Oh, sorry, we’re doing our utmost to find who this pirate broadcaster is, but we have had no results yet. On to internal news, the Ferratura Murder Case is becoming colder day after day. The NPPD has had no luck with this last round of questionings, and the few available evidences seem to be driving the case into a dead end. Of course, the Ferratura family has shown his anger and repulse for the possibility of the case going cold, but law has its times and methods, folks!*

*On the outside of the walls, the NER keeps expanding to control all of Neighvada, in accordance to the treaty subscribed between Ambassador Merry Fields of the NER and the members of the City Board. Roads are safer than before, caravaneers travel to New Pegasus at larger rates and the region is prospering. Ambassador Fields has even promised the arrival of worker groups to start rebuilding the local infrastructure! Isn’t that good news?*

*Speaking of which, that’s all for now. I’ll leave you with another live recording of Dino Maretino at the Clops, this time it’s ‘Ain’t That A Buck In The Head’. Hoping you like it, this humble reporter wishes you a great morning. Remember, this is New Pegasus Radio, and I’m your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

We were absolutely exhausted, but we finally had Freedom Field in sight. The journey had been long and excruciating, but after all, we were close to our goals. We had arrived at dusk at the Neighvada teleporter booth, shaken and dizzy from the magic trip from one location to the other. After a brief time to put ourselves together, we decided to get a move on. All things considered, the night was a better time to travel through the Wasteland while carrying several saddlebags full of gold.

This was, quite reasonably, the most delicate part of our quest for wealth and glory. Out on the open, we were vulnerable. The heavy load we carried made us slow and easy to surround and attack. Therefore, we went almost paranoid in our way back. We only moved at night, hiding during the day in crags, ruins or wherever we could be less evident. Even when we were on the move, we watched our backs and stuck to any sort of wall that would appear on the way.

Due to all those measures, it took us three days to get back to town, instead of the day and a half we had used to reach the teleporter booth. However, it was better for us to travel safely than to travel fast. Now that the spires of New Pegasus were in sight, we could move by day, since the NER patrols made the surroundings of the city safe. I would have to remind myself to thank Harpsong for her diligent service. We sped up to cover the last stretch along the walls to get to the gate of Freedom Field.

“Farsight,” Nadyr asked “now that I think about it... where are we going to stash the gold?”

“That’s a good question!” Rose remarked. “I guess you’ll have given it a go.”

“Yes, I have.” I nodded. “We’re hiding it at Stuka’s place.”

“At Stuka’s? Can you trust her?” Nadyr was dubious.

“She works for Buckmare!” Rose seemed worried. “Are we going to leave all the gold to a member of one of the gangs?”

“Last time I heard, she was the only one I could fully trust... apart from you two.”

“Can you still trust her, though?”

“Do you have a better suggestion?” I replied. “We don’t have a place of our own, so we will do as I say.”

Nadyr grumbled something I couldn’t understand. I knew that he didn’t like leaving the gold with somepony (or some griffin) that he didn’t know fully; but it was our best option, and he had to be aware of that. We could hide our treasure in an empty building, but there was a risk of it being found by a lucky scavenger. By leaving it at Stuka’s, we minimized the chances of being robbed.

Once we walked into Freedom Field, we found ourselves back in our environment, as it seemed that nothing had changed in town. The goons walked around calmly, speaking to each other as if there were no rivalries between the gangs. Caravaneers and trades made their business in the streets, and little colts and fillies ran around trying to catch a spare cap or two. However, there was a subtle hint of tension in the air. Smiles seemed forced, the goons tried to act naturally but they were in fact ready to unholster their guns; more than usual at least.

“A storm is brewing.” Nadyr had noticed it as well. “One word too much, and bullets will fly.”

“Can this be a result of your radio thing?” Rose asked.

“If it is, we have succeeded.” I smiled smugly. “But let’s not waste our time. Let’s get to Stuka’s.”

We moved quickly and nimbly, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. Three ponies with some extra saddlebags were nothing out of the ordinary in the township, but we didn’t want to attract any unwanted eyes... our load was not the everyday trader junk. I sighed in relief when we got into the apartment building where Stuka had settled her “nest”. Nervously, I knocked at her door. If she wasn’t there, we would have to roam the streets with our valuable cargo.

“Coming...” the voice from the inside made me smile. “Who can it be this early... Farsight!”

Stuka was standing at the door, wearing a worn-out sleeping gown and looking rather dozy, although she almost jumped when she found us knocking. In a reflex move, her wings grabbed me and embraced me as

they had done many times before... it felt like home.

“Farsight...” she cooed. “Where have you been? I’ve missed you.”

“Treasure hunting, baby. Treasure hunting.” I mumbled, as feathers almost choked me.

“Any luck?”

“Oh yeah.” I smiled, as she loosened her grip and I could take a step back. “I guess you already know my companions Nadyr and Rose.”

“Hi!” Rose grinned.

“Ma’am.” Nadyr bowed gently.

“Hi guys!” Stuka waved with a smile. “Yes, I do know them. Tell me, what did you find?”

“Before we show you, I need to ask you for something.” I put a stern face.

“What is it?”

“We need you to store it for us. Of course, you can’t speak about it... because it’s something that can, and will, shift the balance of power in town.”

“How intriguing.” Stuka whispered. “OK, you have my word.”

“Unpack, guys!”

With a solid clunk, we dropped our saddlebags and began extracting the ingots and piling them in a corner of the room. Stuka’s face showed what I expected from her; that is, utter amazement. I couldn’t help to smile as I watched her ogle at the shiny metal blocks, probably wondering how much they were worth.

“Gold...” she mumbled. “Where did you find it?”

“That shall be our little secret, if you don’t mind.” I smiled at her.

“OK, I understand.” She nodded. “We all need our secrets. What do you want me to do with it?”

“Store it someplace safe. We’ll be grabbing some ingots every now and then, until we can finally move them to a final destination where it’s fully secure. In the end, the only thing you have to do is keep your beak shut about the gold, and it should be enough.”

“I can do that.” Stuka smiled. “You’ll have to buy me something, though.”

“I’ll take you out for dinner, OK?” I winked.

“You’d better.”

“You have my word.”

“Sorry to interrupt, lovebirds.” Nadyr said, with a frank smile on his face. “What should we do now, Farsight?”

My mind started working at full speed now that we had enough funds to undertake any kind of move. Our standpoint was that we needed to find a suitable candidate for Dee Cleff, to put her back on the center of Freedom Field’s political life. With a swift action, and according to what I had heard on the radio, Goldie’s opposition would be easily crushed. We needed to be careful on our steps, but our goal of forcing a treaty between the NER and Freedom Field was at our hooves’ reach.

“Grab five or six of the ingots and follow me, Nadyr.”

“Gotcha.”

“What should I do?” Rose asked, eager.

“Hmm... I think the best thing you can do is go out there and see how things are going. The radio speaks about a rupture between Goldie and Saddle, but I want to know if it’s true. I wonder if Hertzian’s taken his job a bit too seriously and is spreading blatant lies out to the waves.”

“Consider it done!” Rose darted out of the room.

“Err, Farsight...” Stuka said, carefully. “That end is right. Saddle and Goldie have effectively broken up. However, she’s constantly trying to rebuild the bridges between them.”

I grinned when I pictured Goldie’s situation. Devoid of her alliance with the Buckmares, all her power, both military and mediatic, had turned to nothing. Now she was desperate to get back to the prior status quo, because the threat of being displaced by other leaders, such as Ampera or Dee, was very real.

“Thanks for letting me know, Stuka.” I kissed her gently on the beak. “Where would I be without you?”

“Come on, get lost.” Stuka laughed.

“We’ll be back!” I greeted the griffin and we left the apartment, ready to shake the foundations of Freedom Field.

Back on the street, Nadyr and I set our steps towards the Music School, hoping to meet Dee Cleff. There, we could put things on the move. We kept needing a suitable candidate, but I had an idea brewing in my mind...

“Nadyr,” I asked, “what do you think about Dee?”

“Haven’t you asked this question before?”

“I might, but that’s not the point right now. What’s your opinion on her?”

“In which sense?”

“Let me rephrase the question... If I told you that you could be the top pony in town, what would be the answer?”

“Top pony? You won’t be meaning what you’re meaning...”

“I mean what I mean.” I didn’t want to put it bluntly, but I saw no other way. “Listen, we need to arrange a marriage between Dee Cleff and a suitable stallion to show her as the leader Freedom Field needs. You’re the suitable stallion.”

“Me? You’re joking.”

“No I’m not. You’re rich, you’re young, you’re healthy, and you know when to keep your muzzle shut and let others get the spotlight. You’re the buck Dee needs.”

“A little bold of you, to ask me this, don’t you think?”

“I have to be bold. Think about it, Nadyr! You’d be treated as a king! Money would never be a problem, and you would get to shag a beautiful mare every night!”

Nadyr didn’t answer immediately, as he was considering my proposal. I knew it was a tough decision to make, but I had the hope that he would accept it.

“It sounds good, I must admit that... What would you get from it?”

“That question is pointless.”

“Come on, Farsight. You’re no charity association. If you do something, it’s because you’re getting a profit out of it. What are you expecting to obtain from this?”

“It’s a long shot, but here goes. The NER forced me to break the stalemate among factions in order to enforce a treaty between the Republic and Freedom Field. I got the treaty, and Dee is more than willing to sign it. However, some other factions, such as the Buckmares and the Followers, oppose it. In order to get things sorted out, we need Dee and her Stringers to be back on the lead when it comes to popular favor.”

“And when do I come in exactly?”

“To get popular favor, we needed two things: to erode Goldie’s status of a reliable, street-level hero, which has been sorted out thanks to Radio Nowhere; and to bring Dee back to everypony’s daily life. A wedding with a good candidate, properly shown off, would be the best way to do that. With the Stringers back as the

leading faction, Dee would be able to enforce the treaty with Freedom Field and I would set things straight with the NER. That, and some of our precious gold should buy us our way into New Pegasus.”

“So that’s what you’re after.” Nadyr grinned. “I should have known. Anyway, I like the idea of being somepony important, but not having the responsibility of taking tough decisions. Count me in!”

“That’s the spirit, Celestia-dammit!” I roared in joy. “Let’s go!”

I felt really happy at the moment, relieved of the stress that had been following me since I got out of the Stable. Soon enough, all what I had strived for would finally come together and I would be a citizen of New Pegasus once again, as I should have been from the very beginning.

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The ever so familiar chime of the bell welcomed us to the Music School. Things kept being business as usual, or so it looked: foals and fillies queued in the lobby, waiting for their lesson time to come, while music flowed out of the teaching Hall, sometimes better, sometimes worse. The ring-shaped counter in the middle of the room was still there, still neat and tidy, still with a young mare behind it, filing an endless stream of papers. I was beginning to think that she only moved the papers from one side to another, but hey, who was I to judge?

Truth was we two felt alien and out of place in the School. We always had, but the distance and the time away from Freedom Field had made me notice it more clearly. Two Wastelanders were definitely not the target audience of the classy teachers of the establishment. To everypony’s eyes, we were there to attend other matters. It didn’t worry us all that much, though, it was just funny to see two grizzled stallions clad in armour standing in the middle of a well-furnished room, surrounded by colts and fillies brandishing their instruments.

I took a step forward and leaned myself in the counter, smiling calmly at the young mare behind it. She smiled back at me and left the papers aside, while she waited for me to state my business.

“Hi there, sweetheart.” I winked. “We’re here to speak with Miss Cleff.”

“Did you have an appointment?”

“No, we don’t; but you should tell her Farsight’s back, and that he wants to speak with her as soon as possible.”

“She’s very busy.”

“I don’t doubt that, but please, let her know we’re here. I’m pretty sure she’ll find a way of freeing up her agenda.”

“Fine, sir. Please wait.” The mare headed to the intercom and pressed a button. “Miss Cleff, sorry to interrupt you, but there’s a certain Farsight here, willing to speak to you... yes. Yes. I understand. Of course, right away.”

The mare left the intercom and returned to me with a kind smile.

“Miss Cleff will be meeting you shortly. Please head to the third room to the left, in the first floor.”

“Thanks, dear. I knew that she would listen to us.”

I made a sign to Nadyr, telling him to follow me; and we trotted our way upstairs, to where the meeting would take place. I hadn’t been to that room, and I felt frankly amazed at how large the building actually was. It did seem like the place to rule a city from, but I was going too fast. First we needed to get my striped companion married and the treaty signed. The mentioned door was open, and we found ourselves in a proper conference room, with a large table in the middle meant to host a large number of ponies. Dee was waiting for us at one end of the table, with Metronome to her side. Their faces showed a mixture of eagerness and satisfaction to see us there, as well as a pinch of skepticism. It wouldn’t be smooth sailing.

“It’s so good to see you two back here.” Dee greeted us politely. What I wasn’t able to make out, though, was if she really felt it.

“Thanks, Dee.” I bowed.

“You said you wanted to see me... what do you have to tell us?”

“Well, I’ve got some news and a proposal to make, but first, I’d like to know exactly how you’ve been doing... because that might alter my proposal.”

“Always hiding your cards, eh?” Dee smiled. “You are a very dangerous individual, you know, Farsight?”

“Should I feel threatened by that?” I asked, pretending to be surprised.

“Should you? It depends on whether you consider me a threat.”

“As a leader of a gang, you’re a force to be reckoned with, Dee. I wouldn’t want to mess with you.”

“Good answer.” Dee turned to Metronome. “I guess there’s no harm on putting our friends up to date, is it?”

“We can live with that.” Metronome shrugged, and looked at me. I winked back, reminding her of our little affair. “Things are as follows: Goldie and Saddle have broken up. It is, certainly, one of the best news we could have, since it disbands the main force in town... However, we haven’t managed to profit from it... yet.”

“So, I assume you’re still looking for your significant other.”

“I still am.” Dee seemed annoyed. “I never thought it would be so hard. Ponies seem to avoid me, I guess that they don’t want to be overshadowed by a mare and her obligations. Others may have hidden allegiances that would put them in a dangerous situation; and I have my qualms as well... it’s not like I would tie myself to anypony!”

“Good. It’s all reasonable.” I smiled broadly. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“Now it’s your turn to play, Farsight.”

“Of course.” My smile seemed to get smugger minute by minute. “As you told us to do, we stepped away from the scene while you did your thorough search. We used that time to go explore and search for loot. We’ve had our fun and our strife, and I can definitely say that the experience has enriched us.”

Nadyr snickered at the in-joke.

“Now, while we were away, I thought about something. Why search, when the answer is right in front of us? Young, fit, discreet and handsome.”

“I thought you had stepped away from the competition.” Dee looked at me with amusement.

“Thanks for considering me fit and handsome, but I’m definitely not discreet.”

“Then who?”

“My companion Nadyr.”

“NADYR?” Dee and Metronome started laughing out loud at the same time. I didn’t take it badly, since I knew that out of the blue it sounded like a crazy idea. They just needed to listen to my arguments.

“Why not? He’s a young and strong stallion, loyal and a great conversation partner. He’d be a perfect father for your foals.”

“I don’t doubt that.” Dee wiped a stray tear from her eye. “Still, he’s a no pony, no offence meant.”

“None taken, ma’am.” Nadyr grinned.

“I mean, he’s a hired gun, a low life thug. I wanted to stage a political marriage with somepony worthy of my position. Sadly, Nadyr doesn’t fit that position. Besides, he’s a zebra. The population won’t like that.”

“Even with all that considered, I keep thinking he’s the perfect candidate.”

“I think you’re hiding something from us.” Dee smiled.

“As bright and incisive as usual, Dee.” I nodded. “I’ve got; I mean, Nadyr has an ace up his sleeve.”

I lifted the ingots from my saddlebags and left them on the table. Dee and Metronome gasped and looked awestruck at the pieces of gold shining in front of their faces, mentally calculating how much they could be worth.

“That’s...” Metronome babbled.

“Gold...” Dee mumbled.

“Exactly.” I laughed. “He’s stinking rich. This is just a little morsel to show what I meant. Nadyr IS the perfect candidate: he’s young and handsome, he will step back and let you do your work as a leader; and his wealth will back all your actions up.”

“I see what you mean...” Dee grinned happily.

“Of course you do. They will love him as soon as you mention that he’s got enough riches to boost Freedom Field into a new age of prosperity, and then you’ll be able to enforce the treaty with the NER without opposition.”

“Goldie will be broken.” Dee was floating in glee.

“What about Ampera?” Metronome asked, staying sensible.

“Leave Ampera to me. I reckon she’s trying to hook Saddle up, am I right?”

“Yes, she is.”

“Perfect. I think I’ll get used to dealing good news.” I smiled and leant back.

“So, what now?” Dee asked.

“I believe you and Nadyr should get to know each other. I’m not expecting love to spark between you two, since it’s a political marriage, but it would be preferable to have a tad of cooperation and coordination, in order to give a good image, don’t you think?”

“Reasonable enough.” Dee nodded.

“I’m perfectly OK with that.” Nadyr smiled, and winked at Dee. “Who knows if we’ll get to like each other.”

“Metronome, I think you should start organizing a public presentation of Nadyr as Dee’s fiancé, as well as setting up the wedding as soon as possible. We need to get the treaty signed immediately.”

“Consider it done.” Metronome nodded. “I will get the other leaders rounded up for a meeting where we’ll discuss the treaty.”

“Please do so. In the meantime, I’ve got to pay a visit to the Coilites. There are some loose ends that have to be tied up. If you’ll excuse me...”

I bowed and left the room with Metronome, while Nadyr and Dee began to know themselves a bit better. Nadyr had already begun acting smooth and suave, and Dee seemed to like being treated like a proper mare instead of a gang leader. That couple had possibilities.

Soon enough, I was out on the street and heading for the Tesla Bar. It was fairly rewarding to see the pieces of your plan slowly ticking together, as if they were parts of a finely crafted clockwork mechanism, patiently built to serve a single purpose; which was to get me into New Pegasus, no longer being a pauper, but a rich stallion with all means to rule the City... or the world, if I felt like it.

Deep in those thoughts, I found myself standing at the entrance door of the Coilite base of operations. Last time I had been here, Ampera von Ohm had beaten me with simple arguments and solid points. This time, I had shaken the ground enough to make her points far less solid, or so I hoped. The entrance guard frisked me without much interest, as he seemed to know my face from before, and I walked into the Bar.

Ampera was standing behind the counter, carefully dismantling a laser pistol and cleaning each and every component with military efficiency. Her past as a Steel Ranger surfaced when she was handling any sort of technology, and that made her truly fearsome: a pony that had been cast out of the Rangers was capable of doing anything that got into her will, regardless of who or what stood in between.

“My, my.” Ampera left the pistol on the counter. “I never thought I would see you again.”

“I’m quite resilient, you should know about that already.” I acted friendly, as if I held no grudges against her. Honestly, I didn’t, but our last encounter had been a bit rough.

“I’ll give you that. What brings you here?”

“It’s not that hard, Ampera.”

“I don’t feel like guessing, Farsight. Speak up.”

“Word has it that you and Saddle Buckmare are very close.”

“Of course... since he left Goldie he’s been looking for a proper mare to be with. I’ve been looking for an alliance to strengthen myself and my gang, and besides, Saddle keeps being a very good looker, even if a bit rough at times.”

“However, you still keep going separate ways.”

“An alliance between us could spark a bad reaction from the other gangs. Goldie will definitely get irate, but her lot are just a bunch of hippies. Dee, on the other hoof, is far more worrying. I don’t want to bring the NER and its army knocking at the gates just because Saddle and I...”

“That’s what I’m here for. I’m your particular messenger of love.”

“Cut the crap, Farsight, you know how I react to it.”

“Fair enough.” I shrugged. “Here’s what I bring. Dee is getting married to a wealthy stallion that she’s met. Of course, this wedding is a political maneuver, to get her back to the leading spot. I remember you saying that you have no interest in power, or am I confused?”

“No, I did say that. Carry on.”

“Now, Dee has a treaty with the NER. Autonomous government for Freedom Field, with its independence guaranteed by the Republic. However, the treaty must be accepted by the population in town, and Dee knows she will have Goldie’s opposition. That’s why she’s trying to corner the Followers and leave them ostracized, but in order to do that, she’ll need your cooperation, or at least your complicity.”

“I see.” Ampera scratched her chin with her hoof.

“In practical terms, this means that Dee won’t take any action if you bring Saddle to your yard, provided you can control the vote of the Buckmare faction. You would be able to openly join Saddle, and the city wouldn’t suffer any harm. If nothing, it would prosper thanks to the good relationship with the NER forces.”

Ampera considered her possibilities, but from her expression I could make out that she was pleased. The proposal meant a win-win outcome for all of us, and she had to realize that without a trace of doubt.

“I like what you’re telling me. Will there be a meeting to get things sorted out?”

“Definitely. Metronome should be reaching you shortly, but in a nutshell, I’m assuming you’ll be summoned to the Music School to discuss the treaty. Just one thing, make sure that mister Buckmare doesn’t oppose us during the meeting. We can count with Goldie making noise, and we don’t want to give her reasons to fight. If she realizes that she’s alone, she’ll back down. That, or we’ll make her back down.”

“Well, look at you.” Ampera smiled. “Those are some powerful assertions. Don’t get too cocky, or those that now support you might turn their backs on you.”

“Thanks for the tip, Ampera.”

As we were talking, the front door opened and Metronome walked into the room. From the look on her face, she didn’t expect me to be there. Her expression quickly turned into a smug smile.

“We meet again, Farsight. Good day, Ampera.”

“Metronome.” Ampera greeted her with courtesy and distance.

“We were talking about you!” I smiled. “You couldn’t have arrived at a better time.”

“A meeting?” Ampera ironized.

“So he told you already.” Metronome frowned.

“More or less. In the Music School?”

“In half an hour.”

“I’ll be there.” Ampera nodded.

“Let’s go, Farsight.” Metronome grabbed me from the collar and dragged me out of the Tesla Bar. “Go get yourself a drink, or go to your griffin marefriend for a quickie, but I don’t want to see you messing around with Saddle or Goldie. Your big muzzle is not good for fine diplomacy.”

“Okay, okay...” I sighed. “Let’s not forget that I got you the treaty, but anyway...”

“Bugger off, smartypants. See you at the meeting.”

Metronome turned around and headed for the Four Little Diamonds. Her sudden harshness made me smile. I made her feel uncomfortable and insecure, and that was something that pissed her off remarkably, and somehow, I found that pretty funny. However, I didn’t want to press things to a point of no return, so I’d better leave her in peace. Half an hour should be enough to change and get a proper shower. All that Wasteland dust would require some proper scraping, and I needed to have an adequate look for the occasion.

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Once clean and dressed with my suit, I felt ready and eager for what was coming. To be honest, I had been waiting for this. After all those days of ‘regular adventuring’, fighting our way through the Wasteland, navigating forgotten swamp cities and so on; I was looking forward to getting back to my terrain, that was, plotting and scheming, playing with other ponies’ wills to my favor.

Truth be told, I realized that all this time had hardened me. I was no longer the fearful buck that left the Stable; instead, I had grown to be capable of handling myself out there. I thought that, if everything went awry, I would be able of making a living in the Wasteland. The original fears I had were gone, but they were substituted by another driving force: I wanted to make a living in the City.

In this world, there are two kinds of ponies: puppets and puppeteers. In the old Equestria, that difference might have been a bit less obvious, but in this new and wild post-balefire Equestria of ours, it was clear that some ponies pulled the strings and the rest danced to their beat. I had been played before, but I would become the one in control.

Fully hyped up and ready for what may come, I walked into the conference room in the Music School. Metronome was distributing papers on the table, presumably copies of the NER treaty, so the rest of the attendants could read along; while Dee and Nadyr were chatting on a corner, apparently very relaxed. I smiled at the sight of my companion playing his role with delight.

“Hey there!” I smiled. “I guess I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Hello, Farsight.” Dee greeted. “Nadyr and I were getting to know each other.”

“It did look like that, yeah.” I laughed subtly.

“Dee is a true lady, bro. I hadn’t noticed that before, but now that I’ve been able to have some quality time with her, I’ve realized how intelligent and elegant she is.”

“Cut it out!” Dee blushed and hit Nadyr gently on the leg. I had never seen Dee blush until then... Nadyr was doing a fine job.

“Dee, please.” Metronome interrupted, looking stern. “The rest of the leaders are about to arrive... I guess you won’t like them to see you giggling like a filly.”

“Oh, of course.” Dee took a deep breath and hid herself behind a mask of cold calmness. “Let’s get ready, shall we?”

“Certainly.” I nodded. “Do you wish me to take part in this, Dee?”

“Not actively. I do want you to be around, because you can be a true charmer; but I want to handle things myself. This shouldn’t be a real hassle, if we do it properly.”

“I understand.” I readied myself, taking my place close to Dee.

“Good. Now let’s get this treaty signed, shall we?” Dee smiled cunningly. “Today, we’ll be writing a piece of History.”

While she was pronouncing those fateful words, the sound of hooves trampling let us know that our guests were coming. The door opened and the mare of the entrance counter made way for Saddle Buckmare and Ampera von Ohm, now acting officially as a happy couple. Saddle was wearing a much more fitting black tailored suit, even if a bit old and dusty. On his head, an Appleloosan hat gave him a far more sharp look. It looked like his new engagement status had given him a touch of elegance.

Ampera was wearing a fairly tight blue dress, giving her a more outrageous look than the one I was used to see on the ex-Ranger. However, I assumed that she wanted to get some attention from the public, as she was the mare that had occupied Goldie’s place in big old Buckmare’s heart... or at least in his bed.

“Saddle, Ampera.” Dee greeted the newcomers with courtesy. “Good to see you here.”

“Thanks, Dee.” Ampera bowed. “I hope you appreciate the gesture of not bringing any bodyguard to the meeting. We are willing to end this climate of tension, and therefore, we believe that those measures are unnecessary.”

“Most certainly.” Dee smiled kindly. “We need to take steps in that direction. Thank you, Ampera.”

“You seem to surround yourself pretty well.” Saddle remarked.

Ampera gave him a stern look, letting him know that his last assertion had been useless and fairly wrong. As usual, old Saddle was a loose cannon in need of a proper leash.

“What?” Saddle shrugged. “I count three ponies around her.”

“Saddle!” Ampera hissed.

“Easy now, Ampera.” Dee laughed, trying to calm her down. “Saddle is right, after all. They’re not bodyguards, strictly speaking. Metronome and Farsight are my trusted advisors, and Nadyr is my fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” Ampera asked. “Congratulations, Dee. I knew you were looking for somepony.”

“Thank you, Ampera.”

“No problem.”

“Er... what are we waiting for?” Saddle asked, annoyed.

“Aren’t we missing somepony?” Dee replied.

“Of course. Now I notice.”

“Why isn’t she here?” Dee asked. “Metronome, did you let her know of the meeting?”

“Personally.” Metronome replied swiftly. “She should be here by now.”

A rushed sound of hoofsteps coming from outside was the reply to Dee’s question. The door of the conference room opened harshly and Goldie joined us, panting and huffing. She was still wearing her old and worn lab coat, and her mane looked as if she had been hit by thunder.

“Excuse me, I was in the middle of an operation...” she tried to catch her breath. “I got here as fast as I could... you.”

That last remark was directed at me, as she had seen my face of shameless satisfaction. Goldie was my only obstacle on the path to success, now that Saddle had been conveniently put aside, so every hardship she went through was a tiny bit of happiness for me. From her expression at the moment, I had the feeling that she had

expected me to be gone forever, leaving her room to thrive as the leader of the township.

“Goldie, it’s so good to see you.” I smiled.

“I never thought I’d have to see you again.” Goldie grumbled.

“Life can be a box of surprises, you should know that.” I smiled more.

“Naturally.” Goldie’s tone was cold as ice, and her tone showed utter disgust.

“Goldie, please, don’t get too mad.” Dee intervened to get things sorted out. “We both know Farsight can be a bit of a nuisance sometimes, but don’t take it too badly. We’re here to solve problems, not to generate new ones.”

“If he stops being such a pest, I’ll listen to what you have to say.” Goldie grumbled.

“Farsight...” Dee gave me a stern look.

“Understood.” I nodded and stopped smiling.

“Good.” Dee smiled. “Shall we begin?”

“Go ahead.” Ampera answered promptly.

“Perfect. The reason I have summoned you all here is to discuss a treaty proposal that my assistant Farsight brought from the NER. Now, I know what some of you think of the Republic, but I beg you to listen to what the document has to say.”

“I don’t have anything against the Republic per se.” Ampera shrugged. “The fact that they’re actually willing to negotiate seems like a good sign to me, though. Let’s see what they’ve got to offer.”

“I agree with Ampera.” Saddle was quick to add his remark. “I wouldn’t take them as a dance partner, but they might have interesting proposals.”

I noticed a faint nod from Ampera as Saddle was speaking. She had been working this meeting with him, reaching an agreement regarding the stance the two would take in the negotiation. Those were the things that I liked, the machinery of power, the intrigue and the hidden agendas.

“You seem to have gone bananas.” Goldie grumbled. “Listen to you, Saddle! You were the one that wanted to fight for your freedom, and now you’re talking about proposals? You’re pathetic.”

“What do you suggest we do, then?” Ampera asked, ironically.

“I say we keep things as they are.” Goldie stomped the floor. “They won’t be able to do anything until we take a step. We keep having the upper hoof!”

“Goldie, you’re missing something crucial.” I intervened. “While it’s true that we have the upper hoof, things are not as calm as they were weeks ago. At the slightest sign of unrest, the NER will march into Freedom Field with full legitimacy. As far as I know, you haven’t been able to keep things under control.”

“Why you...” Goldie clenched his teeth.

“Farsight is absolutely right.” Dee sentenced. “We’ve played our gambit properly, and here’s the result. The Republic wants to reach an agreement with us. If we don’t budge now and things go out of hoof, they will feel authorized to impose their law. That will mean our end.”

“And we definitely don’t want that.” Saddle added, with a stern look towards Goldie. Now that was unexpected.

“Saddle, Ampera is playing you like a fool!” Goldie roared.

“Goldie, please. Calm down.” Dee frowned. “There’s no need to resort to that. Please take a moment to listen, this treaty might be beneficial for the Followers too.”

Goldie grumbled something unintelligible and lowered her head towards the papers on the table. I had to hide a smile of victory, because I was definitely enjoying watching the leader of the Followers take a diplomatic

beating.

“Now that this little inconvenience has been sorted out, I’ll make a brief summary of the proposals of the NER. To begin with, the Republic is willing to give us a statute of autonomy. As long as we don’t adopt policies that come in direct conflict with their laws, they’ll let us govern ourselves.”

“Who will regulate that?” Saddle asked. Not a bad question, not at all.

“I presume that no pony will. After all, Neighvada is just a loose end in the NER map. They’ve got enough work rebuilding Canterlot, or Manehattan, or whatever they’re doing now. I’m pretty sure that once they’ve secured the territory, they’ll cross the Divide and leave us alone again.”

“That’s just an assumption.” Ampera remarked. “We have no guarantees.”

“Were you expecting any?” Goldie said sardonically.

“Of course it’s just an assumption. The fact that we’re accepting their treaty doesn’t mean we can’t back down if they break the terms.” Dee replied to Goldie’s attack.

“You’re planning to back down?” Saddle asked, puzzled. That was the old him again.

“No, not at all.” Dee smiled. “We are using this situation to our convenience. We have a good proposal, something that should be profitable for us, but we hold the right to break the treaty if things stop being convenient for us.”

“I see.”

“Let’s not get sidetracked, please.” Ampera said. “You said autonomous government, right?”

“Exactly. It means that we will have to constitute a sort of Town Hall, a formal authority to stick to Republican laws.”

“Oh yeah, and who would be the mayor?” Goldie snared.

“I would take that responsibility.” Dee replied, bluntly.

“See! That’s it, this is all a scheme for you to grasp power!” Goldie roared, her face curled in an ironic smirk of superiority. “You’re selling us to the Republic!”

“Goldie, please, calm down.” Ampera sighed. “I support Dee as a mayor. We know that things would keep being business as usual, while she would handle the bureaucratic issues with the NER. It would make things easy for the rest of us.”

“I agree.” Saddle nodded.

“Saddle! You too?” Goldie showed her incredulity.

“Goldie, you can run for mayor as well.” Dee smiled in almost a motherly way.

“Spare me the kind words. We know who would win.” Goldie grunted.

“It’s called democracy, honey.” Dee whispered with an evil look. “Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. Now, they do want something in return.”

“What, exactly?” Saddle scratched his head.

“They want taxes for our commercial activities.”

“They want to bleed us dry!!” Goldie roared.

“Goldie, please.” Dee frowned. “Let’s keep this professional. Now, about the taxes and the rates, it’s all properly explained in the document, but in a nutshell, it’s not something outrageous. Consider it a pay for the protection the NER gives to the caravan trails that get here.”

“It sounds reasonable. Will the trade suffer some sort of regulation?” Ampera asked.

“Within the walls, trade is controlled by us. Outside, it’s NER business.”

“Drugs and guns?” Saddle mentioned his area of expertise.

“Once again, we will have autonomy to regulate all kinds of trade. What happens beyond the walls is not ours to discuss.”

“Fair enough.” Saddle relaxed, knowing his income was secure.

“But who says they won’t blockade us?” Goldie grumbled.

“If they do, we give them hell.” Dee said sternly. “We will give them a chance, and if they cock it up, we will show no mercy.”

“That’s something I like to hear!” Saddle laughed out loud and stomped the floor.

“Saddle, keep it down.” Ampera grabbed his partner to stop him from prancing.

“Now, there are some more odds and ends, but they’re minor things that can be sorted out afterwards. I propose voting whether we sign the treaty or not.”

“You have my support.” Ampera nodded with a smile.

“Count me in.” Saddle said proudly.

“You’ll regret this, Dee. I swear you will.” Goldie whined. “I know I have nothing to do, but I warn you: this treaty will turn itself against you, sooner or later, and you’ll rue this day. Mark my words.”

“Goldie, shut up and sign it.” Dee said in her coldest voice. “Admit defeat and let’s get this over with.”

Goldie mumbled something and walked to the end of the table where Dee was holding the treaty with her signature already on it. Both Nadyr and I kept a close look on her, expecting a possible violent reaction, but she only signed the document and left the room with a face of disgust. Ampera and Saddle took their turns to leave a mark on the paper, and once all the formalities had been sorted out, Dee turned to a hidden cabinet on the wall and took out a bottle of liquor and some glasses.

“To our success, mares and gentlecolts.” Dee filled the glasses with the ambarine fluid and distributed them among us. “Also, I’d like to let you know that Nadyr and I will be getting married in two days time. The ceremony will be held in the street, so that everypony can enjoy it. Metronome is already setting things up and spreading the news, right?”

“Absolutely.” Metronome nodded.

“Congratulations, Dee.” Ampera gave her a sudden hug, something that looked totally out of place in the hardened ex-Ranger. Guess she had her little feelings as well. “All the best.”

“Nadyr, you should come to the Diamonds for your bachelor party.” Saddle smiled cunningly. “I’ll show you the meaning of a good time!”

I was surprised at how easily enemies had turned into friends, or at least, partners. Not so long ago, Saddle was actively conspiring against Dee, and now, all of us were drinking together. The world can be such a complicated place...

“Now, Farsight.” Dee smiled and gave me the signed treaty. “Would you mind being my envoy for one last time?”

“It will be my greatest pleasure!” I bowed and picked the document, then I turned around and galloped out of the room. The plan was really close to its completion, and I had no time to lose.

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After making a quick stop to change back into Wasteland gear and pack some more gold in my saddlebags, I left Freedom Field to meet the NER. I knew I would need my best skills to get the last pieces in place, and some valuables to push things together, but I was pretty confident on the outcome. Besides, I knew Harpsong good enough to be aware of what to expect.

I expected to be directed to Nobuck, but Metronome had let me know that the NER had moved their base of

operations to the old abandoned airport on the south end of town, since it was larger and better defended. I hadn't even noticed that there was such a facility close to New Pegasus, but after a closer look on my PipBuck map, I found the traces of what could be the mentioned ruins. They were much closer than the old base was, which meant that the most probable reason for the relocation was related to keeping the city under control.

Since I was carrying some valuable material, I stuck to caravaneer groups and NER patrols all the way. I had to endure being questioned by many troopers about my reason to visit Macintosh Airport, but the good thing was that I didn't have to lie: I was an envoy of Freedom Field in a diplomatic mission. Those words made my journey much easier, and some of the soldiers I met in the way offered themselves as an escort force. Of course, had they known I was carrying several ingots of pure gold, they wouldn't have been so friendly with me.

By nightfall, I had crossed the gates of Macintosh Airport. The old courtyard had been turned into a practice field and a boot camp, with tents on the runways and obstacle courses along the chariot parking spaces. I headed for the main gate, located in a large block-shaped building that spanned from one end to the other of the airport grounds. Inside, I was directed to the top floor, to what had been a VIP waiting room, now refurbished to be used as a proper office.

A large flag of the NER decorated the far end of the room, with the two unicorn heads gazing blankly into infinity. A large desk had been located in the middle of the makeshift office, with its corresponding gear on it: a working radio, a lamp, some folders, some papers, and a hoofful of pens and pencils. The rest of the room kept its previous look: a couple of potted plastic plants, some lousy pictures on the walls, and an old carpet on the floor.

What was important in that room was the pony standing behind the desk; a familiar green mare clad in an expensive suit with a pin of the NER on its lapelles. Harpsong was deeply concentrated on a folder with some maps when I entered the office, but as soon as I began to take a look on what she was looking with so much care, she closed the folder and looked at me in the eyes.

"And the prodigal son returns." Harpsong laid back and smiled smugly.

"Not a minute too soon." I smiled back. "It's not been a month."

"I know. From your attitude, I assume that you will have something to say."

"You know me so well, Harpsong." I took the treaty out of my saddlebag and put it in front of her.

"This is the treaty?"

"The very one, signed by all four leaders of Freedom Field."

"I am frankly surprised." Harpsong whistled. "I will be totally honest with you, I never thought you would come out with this outcome. I expected you to go gunning your way to victory, but you have proven me wrong."

"You have too little faith in me. When have I let you down?"

"That will show me." Harpsong laughed. "My, this is one of the best things that have happened to me and the NER in the last weeks. I guess I will have to send Merry to have a word with the leaders of the gangs, and get things on the run."

"Well, Dee Cleff is getting married in two days. I think that the Republic should have at least a diplomatic envoy in the celebration."

"Sounds good to me." Harpsong nodded.

"Now, Harpsong, I think I've gotten you much more than what you asked for. I believe I deserve a retribution."

"Of course, Farsight. I owe you something... what can I do for you?"

"Well, my companions and I would like to become citizens of New Pegasus. For that, we need that somepony

from the inside vouches for us, and I was thinking that the NER could use its embassy to make things easy for us.”

“That is true,” Harpsong raised her brows, “but there’s something else you need to take into account. The one who vouches for you must pay a quantity according to its status inside the city. The NER is just a guest, so the amount required for a Citizenship Card will be considerable, let alone for three of them.”

I let go a smug laugh and looked at Harpsong with delight.

“My dearest Harpsong, that’s where you’re mistaken.” I picked the gold ingots from my saddlebags and left them on the table. “This should make things easier for the Ambassador, shouldn’t it?”

“You can’t be serious…” Harpsong coughed. “This is Equestrian gold! We have been trying to find it! Where did you…?”

“A good magician always hides his tricks.”

“That belongs to the NER.”

“That belongs to whoever finds it, Harpsong.” I said calmly. “You’ve had twenty years to find it, not to mention all the ponypower at your disposal. The gold is mine now. One or two ingots should buy our way into New Pegasus, and the rest is a kind donation from me to the Republic.”

“I could take it by force, you know?”

“Yes, and you would have all of Freedom Field against you, and the Republic would be caught in a war. How will you explain that to your voters?”

“Damn, sometimes I wish I hadn’t met you.” Harpsong hissed. “You’re too expensive for what you give us… fine. I’ll send this to Merry immediately. She should have your Citizenship Cards ready for the wedding.”

“As always, Harpsong, it’s been a pleasure working for the NER.”

“Get lost before I lose my patience.” Harpsong shook her head. I had played her on her own terms, and I had won. No pony likes that feeling.

With a final bow, like the one of an actor before his audience, I left Harpsong’s office, and I didn’t waste any time wandering around the hallways of the airport, now turned into a military base. The sooner I got to Freedom Field, the better. I had a wedding to attend to, and I had the feeling that the groom would ask me to be his best pony.

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Freedom Field was bubbling with activity by the time I got back into town, even if dawn had broken just a few minutes earlier. A large stage was being built in the middle of the city, right in front of the Music School, on the crossing between the two main avenues of the township, so that the wedding could be seen from all sides. It was nothing out of the ordinary, just a pile of scrap metal conveniently assembled, but it would do the trick.

I trotted past the groups of builders on my way to the School, while I started to picture my life on the other side of the walls of New Pegasus. Finally, after all the strife and peril I had been through, I would have reached my goal. Not to mention that I would be doing so in company of two ponies that I could call friends without a doubt; and one of those ponies was getting married today, in the greatest celebration seen in a long time.

With the chime of the bell, I found myself standing on the lobby of what had turned to be our home in Freedom Field. Since it was quite early in the morning, the place was empty, with no youngsters queuing up to take their lessons. The mare on the counter was taking a sip from a mug of coffee, while she listened to the familiar humming of the radio.

“Early bird, huh?” she said with a smile.

“Business never sleeps, you know.” I winked. “So… I was here to check on the groom.”

“Mister Nadyr? He should be on his room. First floor, first room to the right.”

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem... Oh, one thing. He came in pretty late yesterday, so he might be sleeping.”

“He’s getting married in less than six hours. For his sake, I hope he’s ready.”

The mare giggled and nodded.

“You seem to be his voice of reason.”

“More or less. We get together.” I shrugged.

“Of course you do.” She took another sip of coffee and stretched. It was very early for her as well.

I bowed goodbye and trotted upstairs to my zebra companion’s chamber, just to find the door was shut, and that some very familiar snoring noises were coming from the inside. Somepony had been up all night apart from me, apparently. However, while I was all fired up and ready to go, he seemed to have little tolerance to losing sleep. I knocked on the door gently, expecting him to wake up without making a fuss.

“Nadyr.” I called. “Wake up.”

No response, just another loud snore. This would require some patience, and if things didn’t work out, some extreme measures. I knocked once again, this time a bit more strongly, to see if I could beat the reverberating thunder of the half-zebra’s snoring. It didn’t seem to work, as I noticed after three attempts. My patience was starting to burn out, so I decided to go the hard way. I tried the handle of the door, and when I realized it wasn’t locked, I entered the room and hit the light switch.

“Wakey-wakey, mister soon-to-be-married!” I roared. “It’s your great day, get your ass moving!”

Nadyr’s sight was a true disgrace. He was lying on the bed, completely naked and still in a limbo between the land of the living and the land of dreams. Drool was dripping off his open muzzle, and he moaned in a pitiful way. I shook him hard to wake him up, and when he finally snapped out of it, he was still dizzy and lost.

“Errr... what? Where?” he mumbled.

“Nadyr, you’re getting married in five hours. What the hell did you do yesterday?”

“Whu-? Farsight?”

“Yes, it’s me. I’ve been out of town and back, and I find you snoozing away on the day of your wedding!”

“Why are you so upset?” Nadyr mumbled, still sleepy.

Good question... what made me act like that? After all, I had all I wanted: the treaty had been signed and delivered, Harpsong had promised me that the NER would give us our Citizenship status; and yet, I kept pushing for things to carry on. I supposed that it felt dishonest to back down now.

“Go get a shower, then we’ll talk.”

I dragged Nadyr into the bathroom and closed the door. While the sound of running water let me know that my companion was getting clean and ready, I couldn’t help feeling a hint of pride and happiness for him. It was true that this engagement was mostly political and that there was no love beneath it, or at least that was the theory. Knowing both Dee and Nadyr, I had the feeling that they would get along pretty well, and that they would do a nice team and couple.

Still lost in my thoughts, I saw my companion come out of the bathroom, clean and tidy; and far more awake than when I had found him. He was drying his curly mane with an old towel, and he had trimmed his moustache slightly, to look classier without losing a sign of identity.

“Hey Farsight.” He greeted me with a smile. “Mind passing me the suit?”

“The usual suit?”

“Nope. Open the closet, please.”

I followed his orders and opened the large wardrobe that stood on one of the corners of the room; and I found myself looking at a sharp white suit. It looked fairly new, since things didn't stay white for too long in the dusty Wasteland.

"This white suit, I guess, then."

"That very one." Nadyr nodded.

"Where did you steal this from?" I joked.

"Who do you think I am, bro?" Nadyr laughed. "It's Saddle's wedding present. Ever since he's began sticking his thing in the von Ohm lady, he's become quite friendly. You should have seen the party he threw yesterday."

"That's why you're so hung over, right?"

"I've had far worse ones, dude. I'll get over it."

"Don't mess it up, Nadyr. It's your great day."

"Come on, stop chastising me, bro!" Nadyr chuckled. "I would have expected that from Rose, but not from you!"

"I'm full of motherly love and care." I ironized, while he got into his suit.

"Of course."

"Nervous, Nadyr?"

"Not at all. I feel like I could take on the world!"

"That's the spirit, my friend, that's the spirit." I smiled and gave him a hug. "Congratulations."

"Thanks, Farsight. By the way, where have you been all this time? You left in a hurry after the meeting, and you've been missing all the day."

"Call me a bringer of good news." I boasted. "I went to meet our old acquaintance, miss Harpsong Heartstrings, to close the treaty between the NER and Freedom Field. I also bargained for our Citizenship Cards, which we should have in our hooves by the end of the day."

"Are you serious?" Nadyr asked, glad.

"Absolutely. Ambassador Merry Fields will be attending the wedding as a diplomatic envoy. She should be bringing us our tickets to paradise."

"Celestia be praised for this day." Nadyr pranced in joy. "Things couldn't get any better."

"Just wait for tonight. I have the feeling that Dee will know her ABCs in bed."

"Hey, you won't be implying that..."

"Oh, no, hell no!" I laughed out loud. "Not at all. It's just a hunch of mine, but I can be mistaken."

"I hope you're not."

"You'll have to tell me tomorrow." I shrugged.

"I will, rest easy. By the way, how's my tie looking?" Nadyr had finished dressing up and was trying to find a proper mirror to do the final checks.

"It's on its place."

"Very helpful, Farsight!" he snared. "I thought you had a sense of fashion and elegance."

"I do!" I winced. "It's just that it's alright. Don't worry so much."

"Fine, fine." Nadyr huffed. "You know, I might be a bit nervous, bro. I've seen death eye to eye more than once, and yet, this gives me the chills."

I couldn't help laughing out loud. Seeing a pony that had faced the horrors of the Wasteland flinch at the perspective of his own wedding was a bit of a funny contradiction. I passed a foreleg behind his neck and smiled.

"I understand you. Let's go have a beer or two, Nadyr."

"Pretty please." Nadyr smiled.

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Expectation could be felt in the air. Such a wedding was something unique, something out of the everyday routine, that would leave a mark in the history of Freedom Field. Not only was Dee Cleff, the Godmother of the poor, the patroness of the traders, getting married to a wealthy stranger that would help the township prosper; but the gangs were announcing the signature of an agreement with the NER that would benefit the status of the population.

Nothing had been left to chance by Metronome. Goons had been located in all the streets, in order to keep the population safe as well as to maintain things under control. Every pony with something to say would be standing on stage. That meant Nadyr and Dee, obviously, as well as the other gang leaders, Ambassador Fields, Stuka, Snake Eater, Metronome, LaRoche, Rose and me. Even the decoration had been considered, taking into account how difficult it was to obtain quality materials in the Wasteland. A large cloth made out of patchwork covered the stage floor, and garlands made out of scrap paper were hanging from the lamps.

The crowd cheered at the sight of the lucky groom walking onto the stage, followed closely by a blue stallion that looked at one side and another. Once on stage, I felt amazed and worried about the large number of ponies that had gathered to see the event. Somehow, I feared that if somepony wanted to cause damage, that was the best possible scenario. Every important pony was going to be displayed on top of a large platform in the middle of town, in sight of whoever walked by. Curiously, though, Goldie was nowhere to be seen, and that was a bit worrisome.

"Nadyr, my boy!" Saddle boasted. He was wearing a classy black suit with a hat, and he acted as if he was in the middle of a show. All bark and no bite was a good way of defining him. "I told you that suit would be a perfect fit."

"Thanks a lot, Saddle." Nadyr nodded. "White is not my usual colour, but it's good for such an occasion."

"Congrats, m'boy." Old Snake Eater gave Nadyr a hoofshake.

"I'm very happy for you two, you'll make a great couple!" Stuka cheered. "Hi, Farsight!"

"You look great today, Stuka." I smiled. "New feather-do?"

"No, stupid, it's the same old me." She giggled.

A low-pitched mumbling arose from the crowd and made us stop the greetings, as the door to the Music School had opened and a group of ponies was coming out of it. Flanked by both Metronome and Rose, Dee Cleff marched with resolve to the stage, wearing a graceful white dress and a crown of nicked steel. The bridesmaids wore gray dresses, but no pony had been able to stop Rose from covering her head with the blue beret of the NER. It was her signature garment, after all.

While we were watching the bride approach the stage, I was surprised by a purple-coated mare with a pale yellow mane clad in an azure business suit. A familiar pin with the shape of two unicorn heads hung from her lapelles, letting me know who she was representing.

"Ambassador Merry Fields, I presume." I greeted.

"And you must be Farsight." She nodded. Her voice was calm and patient, that of a weathered diplomat used to dealing with mobsters. "Give my warmest congratulations to the happy couple."

"I will, but why don't you do it yourself, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't think they'll have time for much diplomacy now." She pointed at Nadyr, who was standing stiff on his place. "They have more pressing matters to attend to."

“But we don’t, do we?”

“You get the hang of it.” Merry smirked. “It’s nice to talk to somepony that knows the trade.”

“I can’t say I know.” I shrugged. “I’m improvising as I go right now.”

“Not bad, in that case.” She shrugged as well, mimicking me. “But I digress... Vice-President Heartstrings sent me, as I assume you already know.”

“Yes, I do. I was expecting you.”

“Good. Then I can give you this.” Merry took three green documents from her saddlebag and passed them to me. “The NER thanks you for your services.”

“It’s been a pleasure. Harpsong knows where to find me, should she need more assistance.”

“No doubt. Now, I’ll get back to my place. The ceremony is about to start, and I wouldn’t like to spoil anything.”

“Naturally.” I bowed, and Merry returned to her original spot, while Dee Cleff climbed to the top of the stage and welcomed the crowd.

I took a look to the Cards Merry had given me. Made out of green paper and coated in a protective film, the documents enclosed a biometric description of the Citizen, as well as his name and an identification number. A pinch of old world bureaucracy in the new world, that was the underlying idea.

The cheering rose from the many ponies on the streets when Nadyr and Dee walked to the spot on which they would be proclaimed as a married couple. I couldn’t hide my smile when I saw Snake Eater walk to the spot of the authority. From all the ponies on that stage, I never expected him to be the one that would declare them bride and groom.

“It’s a matter of age, I believe.” Rose whispered. She had moved to my side with care and stealth, trying not to attract any attention.

“Whatever the reason is, I swear I would never have thought that Snake Eater could be the chosen one.” I mumbled, honestly puzzled.

“Duh...” Rose groaned. “Who cares? After all, this is all façade.”

“I’ll give you that.” I nodded.

Snake Eater cleared his throat and spoke at the top of his voice, so that his words could be heard from the four corners of Freedom Field. As a response to the signal, the whole crowd went suddenly silent, creating a stark contrast and a feeling of relevance in the air.

“Mares an’ gentlecolts, today is one great day indeed! We ‘ave met ‘ere t’join these two souls t’gether in marriage, so that they can love an’ care fer each other ‘till th’time comes. This’ll be a short ceremony, ‘cause we dun’ want them t’lose any time, do we folks?” Swift laughter came from the audience. “Ah knew it. Let’s begin, then. To everypony who can hear this, Ah, Snake Eater, declare that Mister Nadyr an’ Miss Dee Cleff ‘ave come t’this reunion freely, without any sort of force involved. Am Ah right?”

“Yes.” Dee claimed strongly.

“Yes.” Nadyr replied.

“Good. ‘Ereby Ah declare that both of you are fit and ready t’join yerselves in marriage. Now, let’s ask th’re regulatory questions, ‘kay? Nadyr, d’you take Dee Cleff here as yer wife, to be ‘er rock in th’s storm, to be ‘er shelter in th’dark, to care fer’er an’ to bear with’er ‘till the time to depart comes, may Celestia and Luna aid you in yer task?”

“I do.” Nadyr’s voice trembled slightly, but he stood firm.

“Great. Dee Cleff, d’you take Nadyr as yer husband, to be ‘is guiding light, ‘is savior in despair, ‘is caring companion an’ to make’im a better buck ‘till the time to depart comes, may the Sun and Moon give you strength fer it?”

“I do.” Dee Cleff proclaimed, with tears in her eyes.

“Perfect. Now that yer wills ‘ave been made clear to all the present ones, Ah shall declare you bride an’ groom. May you reach together more than what y’could’ve reached on yer own! Congratulations! Now dun’ be shy, kiss!”

The crowds roared in joy, cheering the names of Dee and Nadyr, as we pranced and stomped the floor of the stage, happy as we all were for those we appreciated. Nadyr took Dee in a dancer-like move and kissed her in the muzzle while leaning her down. The whole lot of ponies that had gathered exploded into a large “awww” when the couple showed its love to the audience. Indeed, if Dee wanted attention, she had put on a hell of a show. Once freed from Nadyr’s embrace, Dee walked to the side of the stage and addressed the crowd.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you so much! You have made me feel the happiest mare on Equestria, and I will never be grateful enough for this. Besides, I can say that I am two times happier today, since I have more good news to share with you. Not only have I gotten married to a wonderful stallion that will be my support and my sidekick for the rest of my life, but I want to announce that Freedom Field is now a true city, recognized by the NER!”

The cheering became stronger, as the Traders and locals that weren’t so easily moved by weddings and such events found something worth celebrating in Dee’s announcement.

“The Republic will consider us a legitimate settlement with our own regulations, and we will rule for the people of Freedom Field! In the next few days, we’ll constitute a Town Hall, in which I will assume the role of Mayor, in order to determine the laws that will help our community prosper! Of course, I can’t do this alone, and from this very stage I would like to welcome Ampera von Ohm and Saddle Buckmare to join me in this adventure that we are about to start.”

I noticed that she had consciously omitted the name of Goldie and I let go a subtle laugh. Dee was perfectly used to measuring her words to say exactly what she wanted to say, and many times her silences were more meaningful than her words. This was her moment of triumph, the peak of her life as a gang leader and now, Mayor of an important city in Neighvada. I was enjoying her speech, recognizing it as my work’s best-case-scenario result, when a familiar beep lit my alarms.

My E.F.S. had detected hostile life forces, coming from behind us, and fast. They were four or five dots spreading out in an arch, and judging from their relative position to ours, they had to be hiding on the rooftops. I quickly began scouting the nearby buildings, with an eye on the PipBuck. I got a glimpse of a masked face and the black, gaping hole of a gun on the roof of an abandoned building, just a second soon enough.

“DEE, GET DOWN!” I roared and leapt forward, towards her.

**DAKKA-DAKKA-DAKKA!!!**

Machine gun fire roared from various spots and chaos descended upon Freedom Field. Where once was celebration, now death loomed from one side to another. My warning had made Dee duck and dodge a bullet directed to her head, but we were caught in a crossfire and exposed from all sides.

“Who the fuck?” Dee roared.

“Everypony get down!!” I yelled, trying to be heard above all the noise. “Try to find cover!”

“We’re exposed here!” Ampera was already on guard, but just the same as the rest of us, was unarmed.

“Give us weapons!” Metronome called the goons for aid, and a hoofful of guns flew onto the stage.

“Easy, folks.” Lavender’s voice sounded cold and calm. Rose had resorted to her in the moment of chaos. “I got this.” Her horn glowed and a glowing screen deflected the bullets away from us. Some of the stray shots landed on the ponies on the street, but those were collateral damages. There was no time to feel sorry for them.

“Where are they?” Saddle roared, with a pistol on his muzzle.

“If the Music School is twelve,” I checked the E.F.S. “One o’clock, three, five, seven and ten. Check the rooftops or open windows.”

I had been given a carbine as well, and I picked my target, the masked buck I had seen at seven. Just to ensure my shot went straight, I dove into S.A.T.S., using the slowed time to clearly aim to the head. Sticking to the basics, I held my breath and pulled the trigger.

### **BA-BA-BANG!**

A spray of bullets flew in the direction of the attacker, and I saw him flinch and fall back after being hit by two of them. With that sorted out, I turned around to check on the other assailants, but the rest of the ponies on stage had done their jobs properly. Guns had gone silent, and it was time to count the bodies.

“Dee, Nadyr, are you two OK?” I asked.

“I’m fine, thanks to you.” Dee sighed, still shocked.

“Just a little shaken. That’s all.” Nadyr smiled.

“Saddle and I are good to go.” Ampera stated.

“Ah’m fine, and so is Metronome.” Snake smiled. “Not bad, youngsters.”

“I’m good to go. Later.” Lavender said, then Rose’s voice returned to her muzzle. “Ambassador Fields?”

“I’m fine.”

“I’ve taken a shot,” said LaRoche, “but it’s a flesh wound. I’m fine.”

“Wait...” said Saddle. “Where’s Stuka?”

It was true, the griffin was nowhere to be seen. Had she flown chasing an enemy, or had she been hit? We looked around, trying to find her. Not that it was hard, since she was bigger than all of us, but the crowd and the chaos made it hard to spot her. Suddenly, a commotion right beneath the stage let us know something was wrong. When we looked down, we saw the body of Stuka covered in blood. She had taken three shots to the chest, without wearing any armor.

“She’s dead...” Dee mumbled.

I felt my world shake beneath my hooves. It was true that our relationship wasn’t based on love, but she was one of the few individuals in this world that had showed me true appreciation; and losing her so quickly and harshly was a blade through my heart. Sadness and anger bubbled inside me, and I did nothing to hide a roar of rage. One second later, I was darting down the street, heading for the rooftop in which I had seen one of the goons.

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I had to force myself to keep calm as I climbed the stairs towards the place where I had seen one of our assailants fall. I wanted revenge for the death of somepony (rather, some griffin) that I held dear, but I had the feeling that there were others pulling the strings of this attack. If I had the luck of finding any of our aggressors alive, I would take my time prying the information from them, and then I would have revenge on them.

As I walked onto the concrete rooftop, I took a look around, searching for possible threats. After all that had happened in the last few minutes, it wouldn’t have been too far fetched to expect a second wave of enemies to finish the job. However, Freedom Field was silent, apart from the odd shot or scream. The pony I had shot from the stage was lying on the floor in the middle of a pool of his own blood. My bullets had hit him on the chest and on the head, so there was nothing I would be able to get from him.

Still, I didn’t feel deterred by that, and I walked to the body, hoping to get any hint of information, any lead to follow. The attacker was wearing a simple armored barding, recently painted black, but without any visible signs or symbols that spoke of that pony’s allegiances. I shoved the body with my magic, rolling it over, and I found a small object lying beneath the pony’s carcass. I lifted it close to inspect it, and I found out that it was a chip, but the symbol printed on it wasn’t that of Buckmare. Five cards, as in a poker hoof, had been drawn

on the sides of the red chip. King, king, ace, ace, ace; the top card being an ornate ace of spades. That symbol didn't belong to anypony in Freedom Field, and while there was a chance of this goon having come from beyond the Wastelands, the most plausible answer was that he had been hired in New Pegasus.

While I was wondering about who could have sent that pony to kill us, my E.F.S. warned me of a hostile pony coming from behind. Without wasting a second, I rolled aside and fired the carbine in the direction pointed by the Eyes-Forward Sparkle. A mare yelled in pain and fell to the floor, and I jumped back on my hooves to face my assailant.

"My, my." I smiled when I found out who it was. "We had already noticed your absence, Goldie."

"Ugh..." Goldie grunted. "You shot me!" She was using her magic to avoid blood loss from a bullet wound in the left foreleg.

"Yes, I did." My tone was cold and wrathful. Adding two plus two, I knew that she was the one that had caused Stuka's death. "And believe me, Goldie, shooting you will be the least of your worries."

"Oh yes?" Goldie barked, still defiant. "What do you intend to do?"

"This." I sent my forehoof slamming against her muzzle, discharging all my anger upon her. She flinched and rolled, blood and broken teeth spilling from her mouth.

"Fuck you." Goldie spat blood. "You're just another goon, Farsight. You've been used to do others' biddings. You're the lowest a pony can get."

"Says she who's lying helpless on the floor." I bucked her in a knee, hitting it from the side. The junction broke with a loud crack, and Goldie wailed in pain.

"You are a monster!"

"I'm not worse than you, Goldie." The hilt of my carbine darted against another of her knees, breaking it with a dry noise.

"Ugh..." Goldie coughed blood and rolled to the side. Her magic was dwindling, and blood had started flowing from the open wound. "I hate you."

"The feeling is mutual." I hissed in anger.

"Farsight, hold it!" Dee's voice echoed from the open staircase door.

"Dee!!" Goldie cried. "Farsight's crazy! He's going to kill me!"

"Shut up, Goldie." Dee walked close to me, followed by Nadyr. "You're not getting away with it this time. You tried to kill us, with the help of Celestia knows who, and you've managed to take Saddle's bodyguard down."

"You have no proof!" Goldie yelled.

"I don't need any. You weren't on stage. That's enough proof for me."

"That's ridiculous!" Goldie was crying.

"You have lost everything with the treaty. Saddle is with Ampera now, and I will lead this town with the help of the Republic. I think that's a powerful enough reason for an attempt of coup d'etat."

"Dee, please..." Goldie sobbed in despair. "Don't let him..."

"I'll do it myself, if it makes you happy." Dee unholstered a pistol.

"No, Dee..." Goldie tried to get up on her hooves, but her broken knees made her fall to the floor. "Don't kill me..."

"Dee, I don't like begging." I said sternly. "But let me have my revenge."

"Fair enough." Dee nodded. "Make it quick, though. We're not animals."

"OK." I shrugged, then I stuck the cannon on the carbine in Goldie's muzzle. "This is for Stuka."

**BANG!**

Droplets of blood and brain matter scattered over the concrete floor of the rooftop, and Goldie's dead body fell off the edge of the building, pushed by the force of the shot. I felt a hint of satisfaction from her death, but something inside me told me that Goldie wasn't the only one responsible for this attack. I would have to keep digging, but this time, I would have to do it on the other side of the walls.

"Well, we all knew this was bound to happen." Dee sighed. "It's just too bad that it had to cost us so much."

"You expected an attack?" I asked. If Dee had seen it coming, why hadn't she acted.

"Honestly, I underestimated Goldie, and this is what has happened. I know you felt something for her, Farsight. Sorry, blame me of her death, if that makes you feel better."

I sighed.

"No, I can't blame you. I never thought she could find goons to hire, so I guess she tricked us all. She's dead now, and the next thing to find out is where she got the help from."

"Have you got any leads?"

"I found this." I tossed the chip at Dee. "The dead buck here had it on him."

"A casino chip..." Dee mumbled. "I would say that this points towards New Pegasus."

"Those were my thoughts exactly." I answered, as Dee gave me the chip back. "I intend to keep searching for answers in there. I owe that to Stuka."

"Of course." Dee smiled kindly. "If you find anything helpful, please let me know. If somepony inside New Pegasus feels threatened by us, that is something that we should be aware of."

I nodded and turned to Nadyr.

"Will you come with me?" I asked.

"Not this time, bro. I have other duties to attend to."

"Of course." I nodded.

"I'll still be here, though, so don't worry. We'll keep having our adventures, trust me."

I smiled and left the building, where Rose was waiting for me. She didn't say a single word, but nodded and followed me in solemn silence. It was the moment I had been waiting for ever since I was cast out, but there was no trace of happiness in me, just the determination to find out who had orchestrated the attack that had killed Stuka.

We got to the checkpoint that led into New Pegasus and showed our brand new Citizenship Cards to the robot guards. A scanner beam went through the card for a couple of times, and the metallic ponylike machine emitted a faint beep.

"Welcome to New Pegasus." The robot spoke with an artificial voice.

The gates opened with a low-pitched moan, and we walked into the neon jungle. Farsight was back in town, and looking for answers.

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Note: Reputation change.

Freedom Field: Friendly. The ponies in Freedom Field know you and know about what you've done for them; and they're thankful for it.

NER: Satisfied. You've proven a worthy asset for the Republic. Expect more news from them.

New Pegasus: Welcome again. Now that you've become a citizen, the gates to a new future are open.

**END OF ACT III**



***ACT IV: EVENING***

## Chapter 14: Private Investigations

*“Hello there, mares and gentlecolts, this is Mister New Pegasus speaking to you from our central studios, here at New Pegasus Radio, bringing you the latest news in the Wasteland and the best music for your ears! Speaking of which, that last one has come to you courtesy of the NER Parade Band! That last piece was part of the repertoire played at the Tenth Anniversary Jubilee of Manehattan’s rebuilding, and I tell you, it sounds simply amazing. Those of you who listen to me regularly know that I’m more into other kinds of music, but every now and then I feel the need to try something different.*

*Speaking of the NER and different things, around a week ago the Republican troops patrolling across Neighvada found a Radio Station that had been under frequent use in the last few weeks, and that was set to override the frequency of this station. In a nutshell, they located and dismantled the pirate Radio Nowhere, that had been causing so much trouble with its illegal broadcasts. I want to thank the authorities of the NER personally and in behalf of New Pegasus Radio for their diligent work and their swift actions.*

*Now, let’s move onto other issues. Remember that unrest that broke out in our neighboring township - excuse me, neighboring city - Freedom Field, right after the big wedding between the new Mayor, miss Dee Cleff and his wealthy husband? We have recently learnt that the Town Hall of Freedom Field has asked for a joint investigation between them and the City Board of New Pegasus, based on the suspicion that the attackers might have come from inside the City walls. Of course, such an accusation lacks valid proof, and the most plausible outcome is that the City Board will reject such an inquiry.*

*Related to this fact, I would like to share some personal thoughts with you, that do not represent the opinions of the station at all. Honestly, how do you feel about the last decision of the NER, giving Freedom Field the status of a City? I thought that the meaning of such a township was to leave those unworthy of being called citizens out of New Pegasus. As far as I know, Freedom Field grew as a sort of illusion of a safe haven in the Wasteland, but still working with the same wild laws of the open territories. Now that the gangsters in Freedom Field have obtained the degree of citizens, how long will it take until they start demanding for privileges like ours? How will the Republic react then?*

*Now, before I keep digressing, let’s move forward. The Ferratura Case, yes, our infamous daily dose of darkness, is just about to be considered as a cold case by the NPPD and left aside. Chief Investigator Brass Badge and his team haven’t been able to find any valid evidence in the last few days, and the pressure enacted by both the Ferraturas and the Full House Group are threatening to bring the work of the Police to a final standstill. In the meantime, the tension between the two leaders, Verrazano Ferratura and Full House, has kept on escalating, with both sides accusing each other of the murder.*

*Outside of the City Walls, things keep being more or less the same. The Republican forces have finally secured Hooper Dam for the NER, thus ensuring power supply to the City. Hooves up for them, folks, and give me a cheer! Also, Ambassador Merry Fields has promised to bring teams of Pegasi Elite Troops to scout above the cloud cover, trying to find a reason for why it still keeps enduring. It seems that beyond the Divide the skies are clear, friends, but I haven’t been able to witness such a wonder. Who knows, maybe we’ll be seeing it soon!*

*And that was all from the news for now, mares and gentlecolts; so let’s return to some music! This record I’ve got here is a true classic, but it never gets old. If I mention the word ‘Hoofbeats’, what comes to your minds? Exactly, time for another dancehall tune from the expert hooves of Vinyl Scratch! Enjoy it, and remember, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

Six weeks had passed since we entered New Pegasus, but for some reason, I had the feeling of being stuck in the same routine day after day. No matter what I did, I always ended up with the same results: nothing at all. The main difference between Freedom Field and our new home was that everypony kept a very cautious silence about the things that went on in town. It wasn’t all that hard to understand, after all. Freedom Field was the Wasteland exposed, where no appearances needed to be withheld. A raider could act as a raider, a

thug could be a thug, and as long as certain individuals weren't bothered by their actions nothing would happen to them. In New Pegasus, everypony wore a disguise, and nopony was what he or she appeared to be.

When we crossed the gates to the bright lights of the city, we were summoned to the Embassy building of the NER by a couple of troopers that waited for us in the entrance checkpoint. Soon enough, we were standing in the office of the Ambassador, waiting for her to meet us. I used that time to take a look around, fueled by my usual curiosity. Similarly to Harpsong's office in the Airport, a large NER flag was hanging from one of the walls of the room, as well as a portrait of a pale peach-colored mare with purple and blue curly mane, dressed in a sharp suit.

"That's President Praline of the NER, Farsight." Merry had opened the door and entered her office.

"I see." I raised my eyebrows. "How did you know I was going to ask you about it?"

"I know the likes of you very well, young one." Merry smirked in irony and made herself comfortable behind her desk. "You're always trying to gather the most information from every pony or place. I thought I might as well spare you the effort of posing the question."

"I think I understand how you got to be Ambassador." I grinned.

"That's it, Farsight. Hard work always pays." Merry waved a hoof to change subject. "Now, let's get down to business, shall we?"

"Well, you tell me what you want." I shrugged. "We just came here."

"I already know that. Just as well as I know that you don't have a place to go now."

"That would be true, yes." I admitted with a faint nod.

"Take care of one thing, Farsight. Even if you have got a Citizenship Card, that doesn't mean you can be wandering around for days in town without getting arrested or deported."

"Is there a sort of curfew or what?"

"Not at all, but if you're always outside, lazing around in the streets, you'll start attracting other ponies' attention, and in the end, you'll get investigated."

"What's your suggestion, then?"

"You should get yourselves an apartment or a loft. A place to hide in every now and then, so that you appear more... civilized. I reckon wealth isn't your problem."

"Who told you that?" I asked, even if I knew the answer beforehand.

"I am in constant communication with Vice-President Heartstrings, and she told me you appeared there with a hoofful of gold ingots from the Equestrian National Reserve."

"I should have seen that coming." I grunted. "Never mind. Carry on."

"My point is that the NER would make great use of that gold, and that you will attract too much attention if you use it as your currency here. I propose paying you generously for each ingot you bring here... nopony will ask questions if you intend to pay with Republican bits."

Merry seemed too eager to get her hooves on our gold, and I didn't like that. The NER had been very helpful to our interests, but that didn't mean that I trusted them fully. Therefore, I decided to be cautious.

"I see your point, but to be really honest with you, I'm not sure whether I like that idea. Don't get me wrong, though. I appreciate all the Republic has done for me in this time, but that gold is not fully mine to deal with. Just to be fair with you, I will bring you some of my ingots, in order to get proper NER currency; so that Rose and I can acquire a proper place to live in. From there on, I will consider what to do with the remaining gold."

"Hrm... understood." Merry didn't hide her disappointment. "As you wish. I can't say this is what I wanted to obtain, but I have no authority over you. However, let me warn you: others will want that gold as well, and they won't be offering you a proper payment in exchange for it."

“Do I have to remind you where I come from?” I said ironically.

“Don’t fool yourself, Farsight. This is a different game. This is a different league, I’d even say. Don’t think that whatever tricks you pulled off in Freedom Field will work here.”

“Is that a threat?” I smirked.

“No.” Merry looked at me sternly. “I’m just giving you a heads-up. It would be a pity that a smart buck like you would get played like a puppet just because he’s too confident in his abilities.”

“I can’t believe the NER is so worried about me.” I chuckled.

“I am not.” Merry grunted. “But others are.”

“I... see.” I mumbled. “Good, is that all?”

“Unless you have any other subject to speak about...”

“Nope.” I shook my head. “I’ll be back with your payment, Ambassador. See you soon.”

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After our little welcome party, we had exchanged some of the gold we brought from Neighborleans for a big case of NER money, with which we managed to buy a nifty little penthouse in an apartment building close to the New Pegasus Strip, the main avenue that crossed town from North to South, and around which all casinos and venues were built. Our new home was comfortable and quite clean, considering what we were used to in Freedom Field.

As soon as we had made ourselves at home, I left Rose to begin searching for information on our attackers. Our only lead was the chip I had found on the dead assailant, and I wasn’t going to be so bold to start asking around about a nopony that had been shot in an unrest in Freedom Field. Such questions would make me suspicious to the local population, and I definitely didn’t want that to happen.

My approach to that inquiry was simple: I would start hanging around at bars and casinos, leaving generous tips and keeping an eye and an ear open for anything suspicious. It wasn’t the best option, since I relied on things happening by themselves instead of making them happen by myself; but I needed to be very careful not to bring unwanted eyes upon me. Soon enough, I learnt that it wouldn’t be so easy to get the information I needed.

Smalltalk was a matter of everyday, but there was nothing I could pry out of the usual bartender or croupier. Not even when I posed more “aggressive” questions did they give me a hint of where to keep looking for. Day after day, I tried different places, different ponies, different approaches; and none of them worked. Finding out who had provided the goons for the assault on the wedding was proving to be a daunting task.

I didn’t give up, though, even if my patience was constantly dripping away with every failed attempt. The rage and sadness because of Stuka’s death had been substituted by determination and a will for answers, since I realized that mourning her would be futile. Nothing would bring her back, and what I needed was a feeling of closure and retribution. However, every day without results was a painful reminder of what had happened.

That very day, though, six weeks after our arrival, something happened that broke the deadlock we had driven ourselves into. I had been trying my luck in the area around the Clops Casino, without any positive results, and I had returned home to have lunch and to have a little shuteye before hitting the streets once again. Rose had been doing the same up and down the Strip, walking close to couples of goons that were having a little laugh, or staying at a short distance from street vendors that might let go a bit of info. Sadly for us, cautiousness was a common trait among the inhabitants of New Pegasus.

All of a sudden, somepony knocked at the door, making me jump from the couch I was lying on and putting both of us on guard. Carefully, I walked to the entrance of our apartment while I told Rose to get a gun ready, just in case. Our time in Freedom Field had made us twitchy, to say the least. When Rose gave me the OK sign, I opened the door and found myself looking at a familiar face: a big, dark green stallion with a short grey mane.

“Captain Brass Badge!” I smiled. “What a pleasant surprise!”

“Farsight, welcome to New Pegasus.” Brass Badge laughed and walked inside. “It’s Commissar Brass Badge now, by the way.”

“You’re six weeks too late for a welcome, but thank you anyway.” I closed the door. “Tell me, what brings you to my humble lair?”

“Humble lair my flank!” Brass Badge laughed. “You’ve got yourself a quite elegant place to be a newcomer... but it’s none of my business.”

“Let’s say I have my ways of getting a stable income.” I shrugged and looked at him in the eyes. We both smiled at our tacit understanding. Don’t ask, and don’t tell.

“Good, I’m glad for you.” Badge noticed Rose for the first time. “And who is this young lady?”

“That’s Desert Rose.”

“Nice to meet you, Commissar.” Rose waved cheerfully.

“Nice to meet you too!” Badge looked at me with irony. “This won’t be your...”

“Oh, no, not at all!” I grinned and waved my hoof. “I met her in the open Wasteland, and we decided to team up. She’s proven to be a worthy companion.”

“I see.” Badge scratched his lower jaw. “Oh well, who am I to judge? I’ve seen odder things in my life.”

“I... won’t ask.” I mumbled. “Anyway, I’m just being rude. Can I offer you something?”

“That won’t be necessary.” Badge smiled. “Still, thank you. If you don’t mind me occupying your couch, though...”

“Please, go ahead.”

Badge stretched and made himself comfortable on the couch. He emitted a faint groan and a sigh.

“All these years of patrolling the streets are starting to have their toll on me. I remember the earlier times, when I could stay on my hooves for four straight days...”

“Errr, sorry, Commissar...”

“Call me Badge, Farsight. I’m off duty now.”

“Fine, Badge. I don’t want to be rude, but there must be a reason for you to come and pay a visit. A reason other than pure etiquette, of course.”

“There is, I admit it.” Badge sighed. “From the day I first saw you I noticed that you were a very perceptive buck. What has brought me here is what happened in Freedom Field the day you entered New Pegasus.”

I had to refrain from gasping. What did he know about the incident in the wedding? What was he intending to obtain from us? Maybe he would be the one to give me the information I had been looking for the last weeks, and he did seem prone to talking freely. Sometimes the least expected pony was the one you needed. Still, even if Brass Badge seemed rather trustworthy, I wouldn’t risk giving him all I had to give without bargaining for something in return.

“That incident.” I sighed. “What makes you so interested about it?”

“The City Board has become quite insistent over the last few days about it... I guess they don’t feel comfortable with Freedom Field becoming a city and having such problems at the same time.”

“That’s bollocks, Badge.” I shook my head. “What did they tell you?”

“Gang unrest, that’s the theory handled by the big bucks in the Board.”

“And you believe them?”

“I’ve learnt not to believe a single word from a politician.” Badge shrugged.

“How wise from you.”

“Thank you, Farsight, you’re too kind.” Badge laughed coarsely. “What we know is that all attackers were shot dead, and that there was a casualty among the attacked. A female griffin.”

“Yes.” I grumbled.

“You knew her... no, you were attached to her.”

“How do you know?”

“Experience has taught me how to decypher ponies’ feelings. You’re not hiding them properly this time.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “There’s nothing wrong in letting you know. We had a relationship.”

“I’m very sorry, Farsight, but I assume you’ll be irking to find answers, am I right?”

“I am.” I admitted. “But I want to know your motives too. I believe it’s fair, don’t you think?”

“It’s understandable. When the attack took place, the Mayor of Freedom Field, Dee Cleff, sent a request for a joint investigation between the NPPD and the security forces of our neighbors, based upon the suspicion that the attack had come from New Pegasus. Of course, the City Board would never accept that theory, so the request was promptly denied. Some time later, we asked the authorities at Freedom Field to let the New Pegasus Police to conduct some questionings and some searches over there.”

“Which will have been swiftly replied with a large no, knowing Dee.” I laughed ironically.

“I knew we wouldn’t get anything from them after our politicians’ last decision, but I was forced to try. Now, the big leaders keep asking me for conclusions on the attack... probably intending to build a case against Freedom Field, in order to complain to the Republic. However, I can’t do anything, since I am not allowed to go to Freedom Field in search of information, and the City Board won’t let their investigators into New Pegasus either. That’s why, as soon as I found out that you had made it here, I decided to come ask for your help.”

“Hm...” I wondered. “I don’t feel too comfortable helping the politicians that cast me out, but I guess that both of us can profit from what each other knows.”

“That would be very kind of you.” Badge smiled.

“It’s not kindness what drives me, Badge. I’ve got my own agenda. You should know it by now.”

“Fair enough.”

It seemed like we had reached an agreement, and Badge was the kind of pony that gave me a positive vibe. Stern, straight and strong-willed, he didn’t seem the betraying kind. With all that in mind, I picked the chip I had found in the dead goon and gave it to Badge.

“What’s this?”

“I found it on one of the attackers’ corpse. It’s a casino chip, but it doesn’t belong to any of the gambling dens of Freedom Field.”

“That’s odd.” Badge inspected the chip with care. “The symbol is that of the Full House Group, so I believe this chip must come from the Platinum Horseshoe.”

“Aren’t you sure?”

“They change their designs regularly, to avoid forgery.” Badge shrugged. “This could be their latest design, I can’t say for sure. However, as I said, the symbol is clearly theirs.”

“So this means there was some implication.”

“I can’t say as much, but it doesn’t look like a gang warfare issue to me.” Badge nodded. “At least, with this in my hooves, I will be able to dismantle that theory.”

“Good for you... Now that you have what you wanted, I think it’s time you started telling me what I need.”

Badge smiled mysteriously before clearing his throat.

“I think I’ve got a better idea. You two happen to have a job?”

“Not yet.” I shook my head. “What are you up to, Badge?”

“I have had an idea that might interest you. Since you’re looking for information, I propose that we team up.”

“Me, becoming a cop?” I laughed to tears. “Seriously, Badge, no offence meant, but I don’t think you got me right.”

“Stop blabbering, you idiot.” Badge groaned. “It’s not that easy to become a member of the NPPD. Besides, I also don’t think you’d fit in. What I’m suggesting is that you two become private eyes hired by the City of New Pegasus. You would have access to our facilities and archives, and if things get a bit out of hoof, you can count on me to cover you... up to some point, of course.”

“That sounds interesting. What’s the catch?”

“Why do you think there’s a catch? You’ll be private eyes, with all the ups and downs it has. You get to access information, but you’ll be more exposed to the wrath of those you piss off.”

“As if there was an actual difference.” Rose huffed.

“You’ve got a point there.” Badge gurgled. “That’s the way it goes... if you want answers, I’m giving you a head start, but everything has its risks.”

“Fair enough... would we have to report to you?”

“Only if I explicitly ask for it.”

“Which you wouldn’t, right?”

“Not in the first place.” Badge shrugged. “I have the feeling that you work better when you’re left alone, but remember that I’ve got eyes on me... they might want me to explain what we’re up to.”

“I understand... you cover me, I cover you.” I walked up and down the room. “I assume that the law would be a bit more... understanding towards us, right?”

“As long as you don’t go kill-crazy in the middle of the Strip, the NPPD will pay you very little attention. I will take care of that personally.”

“That’s good to hear.” I nodded. It wasn’t a bad deal, after all... we would have a bit of a leeway as far as the law was concerned, and we would have access to classified information that should help us progress. “What do you say, Rose?”

“It sounds good to me, Farsight. At least, I can’t see any large flaws... assuming that the NPPD will respect the agreement.”

Her tone had become darker and I noticed Lavender’s traits appearing in her way of behaving. It looked like the two personalities living in her had started understanding each other and cooperating. Lavender’s implied aggressiveness was perfect to make such a remark. Badge couldn’t hide a sudden shiver either.

“O-of course.”

“Well, in that case...” I smiled broadly and gave Badge a hoofshake. “You’ve got yourself two new investigators.”

“Good!” Badge cheered. “Very good! I’m sure you’ll get what you want.”

“That’s what we’ll try to do.” I nodded. “Still, I was expecting you to let us know of the current state of things, before we go searching under every damn stone in town just to find out stuff that you could have told us directly.”

“State of things... OK. I guess that what you need to know is a bit of history. It should give you a global idea of who the major players are.”

“I’m guessing Full House has something to do.”

“You would be guessing right. Let me step a bit back, though.” Brass Badge coughed, cleared his throat and began speaking as if he was narrating a long story. “Some years ago, when I was promoted to Captain, the town was controlled by the Ferratura Family. There might have been other families, other gangs, but as far as I can remember, only the Ferraturas had real power.

Their base was, and keeps being, the Clops Casino. I’m not going to judge what they do inside, but if you sum up the profits they get from selling drinks, gambling and prostitution, you will understand why they are so important. Still, while I worked my way up the ladder, the Ferratura Family was in charge of most businesses in town, or at least it earned some protection money from them.”

“Isn’t that blackmail or something?” Rose asked.

“It is, but that’s the way things go.” Badge shrugged. “As I said, the Ferraturas were in control over all of town, directly or indirectly. However, they held a tight grip with a silk glove, and that was all thanks to good old Novalis, or ‘Nonno’, as they now call him.”

“Novalis?”

“The patriarch of the Ferratura Family. A very good buck, if you ask me, crooked as he is. Even if his business was shady, he understood that things had to be done honorably in order to get respect from the rest of the world, since respect is the only thing that keeps you on top.”

Respect is the only thing that keeps you on top... That wasn’t the first time that I heard that concept. Metronome had told me something similar regarding Dee, back when I was just a newcomer in Freedom Field. It seemed that things worked similarly in New Pegasus.

“Novalis was kind with the poor, welcoming with the foreign, friendly with the newcomers such as me; and unwavering with his enemies, or so they said. I never saw anypony confront Novalis openly, to be honest.”

“A regime of terror?”

“No, not at all. Seeing Novalis walking up and down the Strip with his best suit on, without any kind of escort, was the usual daily routine. Everypony knew that Novalis was the town protector, and he showed it generously, usually without asking for anything in return. However, he got old and weary, and he gave the control of the Family to his two sons: Verrazano and Delvio.”

“Let me guess, that’s where things went wrong.” I snared.

“Not quite. You know, you couldn’t have two brothers being more different than the two Ferratura bucks. Verrazano is aggressive, ruthless and cruel, with violence and enforcement being his only two resources to get his will done. Sometimes it’s hard to believe that Novalis is that butcher’s father, but I guess that he was a spoilt foal, and we’re paying for past mistakes. Delvio, on the other hoof, is a lot more like his father. He’s calm, patient, honest and honorable; not to mention that he is very intelligent and cunning. Actually, I would say he is a lot like you, Farsight. However, he lacks ambition, and he prefers to hide in the shadows and let others be protagonists, even if he is the artifex of the plans.”

“I see. Where does this lead us to?”

“Be patient, will you. When Verrazano took control of the Ferratura business, he tried to establish a more... militaristic domain over New Pegasus, even if he had everything under control. Luckily, Delvio and other advisors were able to convince him that it wasn’t a good idea. Things kept being the same until the Platinum Horseshoe reopened and Full House appeared as a player. Soon enough, the robot units of Full House took over the streets and began “convincing” small venues to pay their protection money to Full House instead of giving it to the Ferraturas. Some assumed that the new boss would be better than the old boss and switched sides voluntarily, and the Casino and its joint venues began attracting population that used to spend its caps on the Clops.”

“And that made Verrazano very angry.” I grinned.

“Exactly. Verrazano was eager to start an open conflict with Full House, but his father and his brother

stopped him from doing it. Besides, the NER had appeared in the scene and it wasn't a good idea to give the Republic a reason to come and enforce order. Since Verrazano was getting a bit too aggressive, old buck Novalis and Delvio used Verrazano's young son Sandmound as a way to keep him on a short leash."

"How exactly?"

"Novalis established Sandmound as the official heir to the Family, leaping over both Verrazano and Delvio. While he was getting ready to undertake his duties, Verrazano would be in charge, if and only if he kept things smooth and calm. However, some time after that, somepony killed Sandmound in the street, and chaos broke loose. Verrazano accused Full House of ordering the murder, Full House implied that Verrazano had something to do with it... and the NPPD got caught in the middle. In all this time of investigation, I haven't been able to question neither Verrazano nor Full House, I haven't managed to find worthy evidence or witnesses... The case is a bloody dead end."

"We might be able to help you with it." I smiled.

"How exactly?"

"I'm sure that you've got many hypotheses about who the murderer was, or who ordered it; but you can't move forward because you can't get any valuable leads. Well, we don't have to do things exactly by the book, so we might be able to obtain the confessions you need in a more... unorthodox way."

"That's not going to work, Farsight." Badge shook his head in denial. "If I show up with such evidence in trial, it will be a matter of time until somepony gets it denied because of its origin."

"Now, now, think about the possibilities." I lectured Badge. "What is your worry? Not being able to catch the culprit and put him into jail? I hardly see how that can be a problem."

"Explain yourself, Farsight."

"Let's suppose that the murderer is a nopony, a mugger or something similar. In that case, both Full House and the Ferraturas would be delighted to have him sentenced, so I don't think any lawyer would work too hard dismantling the evidence."

"You're assuming that the justice system in New Pegasus is corrupt."

"You don't?" I looked at him with true puzzling in my face.

"Well, so far, I haven't had any suspicion."

"In that case, I suppose that you've never faced a case of such broad political implications; which baffles me, really. You've come from Stable 188, like me, and you know how things went down there! When politics are involved, justice is anything but blind!"

"True..." Badge sighed. "I guess that was my idealism speaking."

"I understand how you feel." Rose intervened. "But I fear Farsight's right this time."

"Look, Badge. I'm not saying I like things as they are, but I do think we should get as much profit as possible from the situation. Once this is all sorted out, you can keep doing fair justice."

"Oh well. I'll have to live with that." Badge grunted.

"Good. Let's now assume that Full House is behind all this. In that case, I think we should go to the Ferraturas with the information."

"No! That would spark a war!" Rose roared.

"Would it?" I smiled. "I don't think so. If the Ferraturas, particularly Delvio, are cunning enough they'll use whatever we give them as evidence; and as long as they're being the ones bringing that into public light I doubt any judge will dare to disregard it."

"But what if Verrazano attacks Full House?"

"In that case we 'encourage' Delvio to put Verrazano aside and stop the hostilities. Case closed."

“Would that work?”

“It’s just a hunch, but if we play our cards properly, I don’t see why it shouldn’t. It might be a bit rough and wastelandish, but nopony is perfect.”

“I think you have... greater plans in mind.” Badge mumbled.

“Who, me?” I winced. “No, no, none at all. I’m just making assumptions and following my logic. I don’t know this city enough to make any plan, not to the extent we’re talking about at least.”

“Have it your way...” Badge seemed to suspect me. “What if the attack was ordered by the Ferraturas?”

“I’m not discarding the possibility, but it sounds rather improbable, don’t you think?”

“You would be surprised of the odd things I have seen in my life.”

“Fair enough, one must have an open mind.” I nodded. “In that case, I’d go to Full House. He doesn’t seem like the aggressive kind, does he?”

“He’s a mystery, Farsight. I can’t predict how he would react to such a situation.”

“Oh well, that’s too bad. Still, according to what you’ve seen, he hasn’t been too violent when ‘convincing’ others to join his ranks, has he?”

“The NPPD has never had to go after him, if that’s what you ask.”

“That’s a start, at least; and believe me, once the information is in the hooves of either the Ferraturas or Full House, it won’t matter where it came from. You will have done your job and you’ll get a pat on the back. Isn’t that what you want, after all?”

“More or less, yes.”

“In that case, the only thing I need from you is to let us work in peace, without the NPPD bothering us for every step we take. You can carry on doing things ‘the right way’ and we’ll see where we get to.”

“I can’t guarantee you full immunity, but my bucks will cut you some slack. Don’t go causing a full-scale chaos, though, or both you and I will be in trouble.”

“Rest easy, we’ll be careful.” I grinned with malice.

Badge sighed and got back on his hooves, and began moving towards the door. I walked beside him, and I noticed that he was internally fighting his feelings. He wanted to get the case closed, but he felt unsure about the methods I proposed. However, he had to be aware of the lack of results of doing things ‘by the book’. I opened the door to let him out, and when he was about to leave our apartment, he turned around and looked at me in the eyes.

“You’re not the same buck that left the Stable.” His face was stern, even a bit fearsome. “The Wasteland has changed you... I can’t say if for better or worse. I’m still willing to give you some trust, since we two come from the same place and have been through the same issues... don’t make me regret this. Please.”

“Badge, please, don’t worry. I want answers, you want answers, but the main difference is that you have much more to lose if you break the rules. I’m willing to take the fall if I cock this up, so calm down.”

“OK, fine.” Badge sighed. “You know the way to the station, should you need to check our archives. See you later, Farsight. Rose.”

“Goodbye, Badge.”

“Bye, Captain!” Rose waved from behind.

Badge left the apartment, and I closed the door behind him. We had some tricks up our sleeves now, and I had the feeling that we would start making progress in finding who had ordered the attack on Freedom Field. About the Ferratura murder case, well, answers had to be out there. One just needed to know how to find them.

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After Badge left us on our own again, I had walked into the small kitchen and had begun working on a homemade stew. Somehow, cooking had become my hobby in New Pegasus. I found it surprisingly rewarding and fun, and besides, the lack of action and work in the last times had made me crave for other ways to spend my time. A couple of hours later, the whole flat smelled of cooked molerat meat and vegetables, and I turned the cooker off and moved the pot onto the table, just to let it cool down before eating it.

“Are you totally sure about this, Farsight?” Rose asked.

“About what?” I moved the pot to the table and began sorting out the plates.

“About us taking part in the Ferratura murder investigation. Isn’t that a bit way over our heads?”

“Only time will tell,” I shrugged “but I’ve got the feeling that it can’t be that much of a problem. Besides, it’s not like we’ve literally promised him we would get the case solved. We told him we would help, that’s all. Let’s not forget that our main worry now is to find out who the responsible for the attack on Freedom Field is. Whatever we can find out related to the murder case will be good, but it’s not priority.”

I served the stew and tried it. Not bad, for a beginner like me.

“Priority or not, I don’t feel comfortable getting into such deep waters.”

“I thought you were the optimist in this group, Rose.” I smiled and took a sip. “Haven’t we been through harder times?”

“Hm... I have to agree with you there. Neighborleans was no easy feat.” Rose sighed and concentrated on her plate.

“There you go. Speaking of which, what happened to that sprite that followed you?”

“Who, Bonafyre? I don’t know. It didn’t follow us through the teleporter.”

“I see...”

Rose picked the last piece of meat and ate it whole, while her face showed that she was liking it quite a lot.

“Did you do this, Farsight?” she muttered. “It’s not bad at all!”

“Thank you.” I bowed.

“Come on!” Rose chuckled. “By the way, were you honest to Badge?”

“Honest in which sense?”

“Don’t you have any plan in mind, Farsight? You really don’t?”

“Why does no pony believe me?” I laughed at her question. “Seriously, I’m being honest for once and all of you think I’m hiding something! I guess this is what I deserve for being such a schemer.” I shook my head in pretended dismay, causing Rose to chuckle. “No, seriously now, I have nothing in mind... for now. My only plan is to find what we came here to find. Once we have our answers, I’ll think about which steps to take.”

“What will you do if Full House or the Ferraturas were the ones ordering the attack?”

“I don’t know. Of course, I’ll try to find a way to have our vengeance; but I have no idea about what or how I will do it.”

I finished with my meal and began cleaning the plates and pots, while Rose seemed worried about our future. It was understandable, and maybe I was being a bit too trusting, but we had to carry on. I owed that to Stuka, and I wouldn’t be able to live in peace while I had that unfinished business in my mind.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Rose asked.

I took my time to meditate about our next steps. It was obvious that we would have to ‘hunt’ our information, so to speak, since doing things by the book hadn’t worked for Badge and his crew. However, we couldn’t act like loose cannons or we would attract attention. We needed to be very careful and very resolved to get positive results; and for that, we needed to know our potential enemies.

“We are going to split up.” I felt eager to start, and so I made clear with my voice. “Rose, I need you to take a look around the Platinum Horseshoe, to confirm whether the chip we found is Full House’s or not. In the meantime, I will dive in the NPPD archives for information.”

“I’m a filly... don’t you think they won’t let me in?”

“Maybe, but I suppose there will be places that you will be able to get into... I don’t know, perhaps you can get in a restaurant or someplace similar, where gamblers from the Casino go to. Try to get a glimpse on the chips the ponies use over there, then get out and come find me. Be as inconspicuous as possible, that is the only thing you really need to be careful about.”

“Understood, Farsight.” Rose nodded. “I’ll be like a shadow in the night!”

“I hope you manage to do that. Let’s get moving!”

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The memories of my first time in the NPPD Station hadn’t been too pleasant, to be honest. I had been scared to death, puzzled, half broken and if that weren’t enough, I had been dragged there by two robot ponies and interrogated by a trigger-happy foal. This time I was walking in as a free citizen with nothing to fear, but to be honest, the place kept being plain ugly. The fact that it looked like a massive concrete block wouldn’t help either.

Inside, though, the building had been shown more love and care, even if things kept reeking of fanatic predominance of function over form. The walls had been painted in white and blue, the colours of the corps, but without any sign of taste, just a dull white overall with a blue line at flank height. Doors and furniture were made out of actual wood, but every single item followed the same pattern of straight lines and conventional shapes. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciated the rationalist design, and I did think that objects had to be designed to fill a function; but there were ways of making an item functional and good looking.

The muffled sound of a radio filled the air in the lobby; the twangs and picks of a guitar and the broken voice of one of those Wasteland singers that had become increasingly popular over the months; while a lone young buck stood guard in the entrance checkpoint. At first I didn’t notice it, but in a second look, the face of the cop rang a bell in my mind.

“Goodness me, if it isn’t Standoff.” I grimaced, remembering how he had treated me in my last visit.

“Who the...?” Standoff snapped off his distraction, and looked at me. “Wait a minute. You!”

“Yes, me.” I looked at his puzzled face while he tried to figure out who I was. “Do you remember?”

“You’re that buck!” Nice remark. I was ‘that buck’.

“Come on, boy. You’re almost there.” I snickered.

“You’re the Stable outcast we deported some months ago!”

Finally. I thought we were going to be there all day.

“Bingo!” I pranced. “Now, if you could just remember my name, it would be all peachy.”

“Hey, watch what you say.” Standoff squinted. “I don’t get along with smartypants bucks.”

“I noticed that the last time we met.” I didn’t hide my irony.

“So, what are you here for?” he grunted. “Round two?”

“Please, what do you think I am, Officer Standoff!” I whined theatrically. “I’m a civilized, law-abiding pony who is here to serve the NPPD.”

“And how do you intend to do that?”

“Has your Captain told you about some private investigators that would give the police a hoof in the Ferratura case, among others?”

“Yes, he has - wait a minute. YOU are the private eye?”

“Why, yes, I am. If you don’t trust me, you can go ask Captain Brass Badge.” I winked. “Does that bother you?”

“As long as you don’t play with my patience...” he grumbled.

“Good, I knew we could get along.” I smiled. “Now, where do you folks keep the archive? I need to dig in some files.”

“Wait, do you have permission?” Standoff barked. He didn’t seem to have understood the concept of getting along as colleagues.

“Hey, it’s perfectly fine if you don’t believe me.” I shrugged. “Ask the Captain about it.”

“On second thought... last door on the left. Don’t mess things up too much, or I will have to go put everything into place back again.”

“Don’t you worry.” I nodded. “I’ll be very careful.”

I left Standoff grumbling something I couldn’t understand as I trotted down the hallway to the archives. The relationship between the two police stallions was a curious one indeed. Standoff seemed to fear or despise Brass Badge up to a point of not confirming my words, just to avoid having to confront him; but at the same time he was overtly aggressive towards the Captain, at least when he wasn’t present.

Somehow, that reminded me of what Badge had told us regarding the Ferratura family. Novalis’ way of maintaining control had been that of speaking softly and carrying a big stick, one could say. His model of dominance had been based upon the cooperation with his subjects, being friendly and helpful, aiding those in need and protecting those who were weak; while charging a reasonable price and having a certain militarized force to deter enemies from attacking his empire. His son Delvio seemed to favor that way of acting, and that was, apparently, what Sandmound would have done.

Verrazano, on the other hoof, favored a much more aggressive approach to city domination. He wanted to boost his armed forces and to bring the fight to Full House’s turf, while coercing the smaller businesses for their protection money. The impetuous Ferratura chieftain had switched to the way of speaking harshly and waving the big stick from one side to the other. However, as in the case of Badge and Standoff, what that ended up causing was a will from the subjects to break free.

The lesson that could be obtained from those cases was simple. Power must be handled softly. Hold on to it too strongly and it will slip through your grasp. With that idea in my mind, I walked into the archive room, a large storage hall stacked with shelves that held boxes full of paperwork and evidence.

“For being such a developed city, they could have scrounged up a terminal to keep track of everything...” I grunted, and began an arduous search through the files. I had little hope of finding any leads pointing towards the attack on Freedom Field, so I focused on the Ferratura Murder. Even if that wasn’t what I really wanted to solve, it seemed like a nice can-opener, as it was something that had shaken the foundations of New Pegasus and had sparked rivalries. Every player had something to win or to lose from the murder.

It didn’t take me much to find the desired boxes, as it was a case that was still open and therefore, it was easy to retrieve. To be such an important case, I found the box to be surprisingly lightweight. Even if there had been little evidence, I expected more material to be gathered in there. I could understand why the police hadn’t been able to make many advances, but then again, it was all a matter of focus.

According to the file, Sandmound Ferratura had been found dead on a small side street, at a reasonable distance from the Strip. First question, what had driven Sandmound into a place so far from unwanted eyes? Had it been a mare? Had he been coerced or drugged? One young and intelligent buck, such as the dead heir was, wouldn’t willingly walk into a dark alley unless there was something that motivated him to do so.

Secondly, the cause of death had been two gunshots to the back of the head, fired at almost point-blank range. Whoever the killer was, it had been able to get really close to the victim. That didn’t sound like a standard mugging... maybe an attempted robbery gone wrong? A frustrated kidnapping? Another fact to be taken into account was that somepony had taken great care in eliminating every possible evidence from the crime scene. For me, that ruled out the possibility that the murder had been a matter of chance or

opportunism. That assassination had been thoroughly planned.

Assuming there was a plan behind Sandmound's death, my mind began to consider the possible players who might have orchestrated it. According to Brass Badge, there were two main suspects, plus a third less probable but still not discardable one. I needed to consider what each one had to win or to lose with the murder, to be able to build consistent theories to play with. If I wanted to get in the game, I needed to have proper cards.

First things first, the most obvious culprit was Full House. Not that he would have done it by himself, of course, but he could have been the mastermind. Sandmound's death would leave the Ferratura Family without a proper heir and in total disarray, as Verrazano and Delvio's differences in character would cause them to clash and argue for each and every decision to be taken. One couldn't forget the role that Novalis would have to play in the current situation, as the great Don of the Family was still capable of taking relevant choices, namely the one of designating a heir. Would primogeniture be the criterion, giving Verrazano the control, or would Novalis prefer a more diplomatic successor and nominate Delvio?

In return, Full House would appear as the most obvious suspect, to all keen eyes. Therefore, even if innocent, many voices among the population of New Pegasus would consider him to blame for Sandmound's death, and the Ferraturas could use that vox populi to justify a revenge. Was Full House interested in incurring such risks?

Secondly, one could think on blaming Verrazano Ferratura. Even if it sounded outrageous that a pony could order his own son's assassination, there were obvious benefits for him. To begin with, Sandmound had been designated heir by his own father, bypassing him in the succession line of the Family. By taking Sandmound out of the picture, old buck Novalis would have to reconsider his decision and establish a new heir. Of course, that left the possibility of Delvio being the chosen one, but who said that Verrazano couldn't have him killed? Besides, the death of Sandmound would give Verrazano a proper casus belli against Full House, and a chance to regain control over New Pegasus by force.

However, Verrazano was putting himself in a risky position if he was, indeed, the mind behind the assassination. The murder of one's son would not go unpunished even in the most uncivilized of places, and New Pegasus looked like a place where appearances were of great importance. If Verrazano's implication was discovered, he would surely lose any chance to become the new Capo of the Family... and he would most probably get shot.

Then, there was Delvio as a possible suspect. It was true that he had less to win from the assassination, but if he managed to pull it off properly and put the blame on his brother, he would be prompted to the top spot as heir to the control of the family empire. Still, that didn't seem to fit with his character, but I wouldn't discard all his way of acting to be a façade to hide a very dangerous individual.

Delvio had less to lose, since he was a far less probable suspect for any investigator; but if he was proven to be the pony behind the murder, he would be in a situation similar to that of Verrazano's. All things considered, though, Delvio would have more chances of getting away with it because of his cautious and non-ambitious appearance.

Last but not least, there was another possibility I had initially discarded, but that I realized I needed to keep under consideration. What if Novalis himself had ordered his grandson's murder? It was quite more far fetched, but Novalis could be wanting to put the blame on Full House so that his violent son Verrazano would start a war... just to intervene and stop it, thus showing that he wasn't too old to rule. It was very convoluted, but it wasn't impossible; therefore, I couldn't throw it away.

"Here you are!" Rose's voice almost made me jump. I hadn't noticed her coming.

"Don't sneak up on me like that, for Luna's sake!" I sighed, my heart still beating like crazy.

"Sorry, Farsight." Rose giggled and blushed. "It's taken me a while to find you. Besides, the officer at the gate wasn't too helpful."

"Who, a young buck?"

“Yes, rather young.”

“Then you’ve met my friend Standoff.” I shook my head in disgust. “What a dick.”

“I totally agree.” Rose nodded. “Any luck?”

“Nothing on the attack on Freedom Field.” I shrugged. “Not that I expected to find anything useful.”

“What about the murder case?”

“Well, there are some files on the matter. Sandmound was killed on a gutter, far from the Strip, by means of two point-blank shots to the back of his head.”

“An execution?”

“That’s what it looks like.”

“Any ideas on who might have done it?”

“I would discard a normal mugger or things like that. The attack was orchestrated.”

“So, we’re talking about top-level players here.”

“Once again, that seems to be the most probable explanation. Nothing is final, though.” I sighed. “I don’t think we’ll ever have anything final in this case. How was your day?”

“Not that bad, after all.” Rose smiled sincerely. “I managed to see how the Platinum Horseshoe chips look like, and they are like the one you found.”

“So, Full House was involved in the attack!” I grunted.

“At least, the pony you killed had been in the Horseshoe. That’s what we can assure.”

“True...” I mumbled. “You know what, Rose? I think it’s time we begin to ask questions.”

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With no haste, but without hesitation, we began our search for a valid candidate for questioning. We had to be careful, for our actions would without a doubt stir up the situation in New Pegasus. Until then, we had stayed under the radar, moving along like two nameless citizens among the crowds. However, as soon as we obtained our answers, the situation would become far more unstable for us. We weren’t going to be clean and tidy after all, so we had to do things so that the first shot was a good one.

Rose and I scattered and began scouting the Platinum Horseshoe and its surroundings, looking for somepony who might have access to such a level of information. Of course, that excluded the croupiers and bartenders, low level employees who would never be aware of those strategic decisions, provided that Full House was a serious and responsible entrepreneur, which from the looks of things, he actually was.

Goons were out of the question as well. Even if a henchpony of a certain level would have to know about the handlings of his superiors, the problem in this particular case was that all the security enforcers were robots, and therefore, invalid for questioning. We needed to find a flesh-and-bone pony who could provide us of the answers we needed.

I realized that I had to be extremely careful when conducting this investigation of ours. Until now, we had been playing in a minor league, so to speak, as the mobsters in Freedom Field didn’t have the level of power and influence that the ones in New Pegasus showed. Even if Dee was the most powerful leader in the neighboring township, she didn’t have as much strength in terms of weaponry and ponypower as the two contending factions in the city of the Casinos.

Still, I began to perceive an opportunity in all that situation. New Pegasus was on the verge of a conflict. Full House was constantly taking over Ferratura underlings and defying their past position as the leaders of the city, while Verrazano Ferratura was striving to enact his revenge on the ground of the murder of his own son. No pony knew who the responsible was, but a small push in the right direction with Sandmound involved would get the war machine running. Who knows who might profit from it.

“That face...” Rose’s voice made me jump, startled. “You’re plotting stuff once again.”

“Rose, please.” I sighed. “Don’t sneak on me!”

“You always fall for that one.” Rose giggled.

“Well, stop doing it!” I grumbled. “One of these days, you’ll give me a stroke.”

“Come on, Farsight, don’t go drama queen on me.” Rose smiled... or was it Lavender? Sometimes it was hard to tell who I was speaking to. “You WERE plotting something, right?”

“I’m beginning to see a possibility, Rose. Still, it’s far from being factible.”

“Oh no, you want to take over the world once again.”

“More or less.” I grinned. “I think we could profit of a bit of chaos in New Pegasus, by being in the right place at the right time.”

“Tell me one thing, Farsight. Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what? Finding the answers we need?”

“No. Why are you putting your life on the line once again?” Rose looked at me with clear worry in her eyes, and I felt suddenly uncomfortable. Was she showing new feelings towards me? The kind of feelings a filly shouldn’t have towards me, that is?

“Think of it, Rose.” I tried to keep calm and disregard those thoughts. “We’re living a borrowed life in New Pegasus. Our citizenship was issued by the NER, and even if they’ve withheld their treaties, I can’t fully trust them. I don’t know when or if they’ll turn their backs on us, or if they’ll require more services from us. Harpsong clearly saw us as useful tools, but tools nonetheless, and Stonetree hates me directly. Also, there’s the monetary matter.”

“Monetary? Farsight, we’ve got a stash of gold!”

“Yes, we do, but if somepony finds out, we’ll be as good as dead. As soon as we can secure a stream of income, we won’t draw any suspicions on us. Don’t you see that we must look odd, walking along and spending without thinking twice, even if we have no jobs?”

“True...” Rose nodded thoughtfully.

“Also, let’s not forget that Nadyr has a stake on that gold too, and now that he’s a happily married stallion, his wife will also have something to say about it.”

“If that is a problem, why don’t you look for a regular job instead of plotting the fall of New Pegasus?”

“Well, that’s my forte, after all.” I sighed. “It’s what I do best.”

“I can’t argue with you on that.” Rose shook her head. “And I know I won’t be able to stop you from carrying on with your plan. Just be careful.”

“I don’t pretend to die, Rose. Now, why are you here? Found anything?”

“Maybe. I’ve got my eyes put on a certain buck over there.” Rose looked over her shoulder, pointing me in the direction of the roulette tables.

My companion’s target was a middle-aged stallion, pale red coat with copper mane, combed backwards and carefully gelled. He was wearing a sharp yet worn beige suit, a shirt and a matching tie, and he walked from one side to the other of the table area with the expertise of a pony that had been doing the same job for a long time.

“Big red one?” I asked.

“The very one.” Rose replied. “He’s not a gambler, he hasn’t played a single chip since we got into the Casino; but he keeps moving to and fro, keeping his eyes on the tables, and more importantly, on the gamblers. Besides, he’s wearing a small badge that says that he works in here.”

“Fine, but is he our buck?”

“He’s not an ordinary croupier, that’s for sure. Whoever he is, he must be somepony important in the Casino. I haven’t seen any other of his kind around here, so I think he’ll be our best bet.”

“Then, it’s time to go double or nothing.” I smiled. “How are we going to get him out of the Casino?”

“I’ve seen him ogling at some beautiful mares.” Rose smiled cunningly. Once again, I had the feeling that Lavender had put herself in charge. “I think I’ll be able to lure him out of the Casino. Where should I take him to?”

“Our place would be fine, as long as we don’t have to clean blood from every single wall.” I shook my head in denial. “What if it doesn’t work?”

“In that case, we’ll have to think again.” Rose/Lavender shrugged. “But to be honest, I believe I’ll get things done.”

“Go ahead, I’ll be close.”

Rose (or Lavender, I couldn’t tell who) walked towards the red buck, while I took a detour through the Baccarat tables, keeping both of them in my sights. My companion had adopted a very different behaviour, swinging seductively from one side to the other, while she apparently whistled a tune. I saw that our target noticed her and looked puzzled and pleased at the same time, so things appeared to go according to Rose’s plan. I hurried up to a vantage position from which I could overhear the conversation they were starting.

“My, who do we have here?” The buck’s voice was mellifluous, almost as sticky as his mane looked. “You must be a newcomer.”

“What makes you think that, handsome?” Rose’s tone was soft and warm as the dusk breeze in the Wasteland.

“Something so beautiful couldn’t have gone unnoticed by me.” He smiled. Disgusting.

“You seem to be very confident about what you know and don’t know.”

“I have knowledge of many things going on in this city, miss...”

“Lavender.” My companion waved her eyelashes up and down. “But you can call me whatever you want, honey.”

“You sure are straightforward, Lavender. I’m Rocky Shade, Chief of Security in the Platinum Horseshoe, but tonight you can call me Rocky.”

“Fine, Rocky...” Rose (or Lavender, if I took her word for granted) took a step towards the red buck. “You’re right on one thing. I am fairly straightforward; when I see something I like, I go for it with no brakes. This time, I like you, and I want you to be mine tonight.”

Rose’s tone had been tremendously seductive and well measured. I didn’t know how she had managed to pull off such a trick, but I admit I felt worryingly aroused by her words, even if I knew they weren’t directed to me. Rocky had to feel so too, because he coughed suddenly and tried to look calm and in control, although I had the feeling that he was having a tough time.

“Really?” Rocky smiled nervously. “Well, I had never been in such a...”

“Rocky, I don’t have much patience, so make your choice. Come with me and I will give you the night of your life... or stick to your job and forget about me. Is it clear?”

“Very clear, Lavender.” Rocky tried to appear confident. “Lead the way.”

“Follow me, handsome.” Rose winked and walked out of the Casino, with Rocky following her closely.

I tried to be inconspicuous while I made my way through the streets of New Pegasus, doing a real effort not to lose Rose and Rocky before they got to our apartment building. I had little idea of what she intended to do once they got to our place, but I didn’t want to leave her alone with that slimy buck. If something was to happen to Rose, I wouldn’t be able to bear it.

A couple of minutes later I was climbing the stairs to our apartment, keeping a safe distance from Rose and Rocky. I had seen them enter the building some seconds ago, and I was trying to be as fast as possible while keeping out of their line of sight. However, I had heard the main door of my flat open and close again, so the time for being careful was over, and it was the time to run.

I darted into the apartment with the rifle ready for any inconvenience, and I found to my surprise that good old Rocky was tied up to my bed with his pants on his hooves. Whatever fun he intended to obtain that night had flown off the window, and Rose was looking at him with a cunning smile. On a second thought, it had to be Lavender.

“Welcome home, Farsight!” She smiled in a way that made me shiver. “You arrive not a second too late!”

“Who is this?” Rocky yelled in anger. “What do you want from me?”

“Now, now, mister Shade.” I left my worries aside and began getting into character, as Nadyr would have said. “We just want some information from you.”

“Information?” Rocky roared. “Who do you think you are?”

“Me?” I laughed, but Lavender interrupted me suddenly.

“Please, let me handle this.” She winked, and turned to Rocky. “Rocky, please, don’t make me do this harder than what it has to be.”

Her tone had returned to be gentle and caring, as if Rose had assumed control once again. Was she actually shifting between her two personalities to play with his mind? If she was, that was most impressive, I had to admit it. I felt a rush of pride for her, for her strength of will and for her cunning. She had grown a lot from the day we first met, and that gave me a sense of success.

“Harder?” Rocky roared and struggled to free himself. “Are you crazy? As soon as Full House finds about this...!”

“Calm down, Rocky, please.” Rose whispered. “We’ll record the audio, so that you rest assured that we won’t abuse you.”

I nodded and activated the recording function on my PipBuck. I stood close to Rose and Rocky, so that the sound would be clearly stored in my hoofheld device, and I got ready to watch what my companion was planning for our unfortunate guest.

“That’s ridiculous! You won’t get a word out of me!” Rocky stood strong.

“Please, Rocky, be reasonable.” Rose said in a soothing voice. “We only need a bit of cooperation. Do it, and I will give you what I promised...”

She used her magic to gently caress him on his exposed belly and undercarriage, making his ‘fifth hoof’ shake and grow. Rocky shook and smiled for a moment, but then his grin disappeared and his expression became stern and disgruntled once again. Swing and miss, Rose.

“No way. My loyalty to Full House can’t be bought by a filly slut.”

“Oh, it can’t?” Rose’s tone became harder, probably when Lavender took control. “Are you telling me you want to do it rough?”

Suddenly, her horn glowed bright red and her grip tightened on his lower end, making him wail in pain in a way that made me gulp. Lavender showed a considerable amount of resources when it came to causing pain. Rocky was sweating profusely as my companion walked close to his face, her horn still glowing with the pressure spell.

“Now, now, Rocky, dear... How do you intend to fuck me if I squeeze your thing dry... or I break it like a twig?” Lavender said darkly. “I was hoping you could make me a real mare... and the only thing I needed was you to tell me a little secret.”

“Ugh... please... let... me... go!” Rocky cried.

“Lavender, don’t lose your mind.” I warned her, as I saw she was getting fired up. “We need him to speak.”  
“OK.”

Lavender broke the spell and Rocky sighed while his squeezed member fell to one side.

“You see what I’m capable of doing when I’m angry...” Rose was once again in control of the filly’s body, and spoke in a soothing voice. “I prefer to do things differently, but if you insist on being so stubborn, I will have no other choice.”

“But... I can’t...” Rocky mumbled, tears falling from his eyes. “I swore loyalty to Full House... and if I cross him...”

“Then WHAT?” Lavender roared once again, and Rocky’s hindlegs bent in an impossible angle with a blood-freezing crack.

“EEEEYAAAAH!” Rocky screamed in despair as the burning pain of his freshly destroyed knees spread through his body.

“Lavender...” I mumbled. “Don’t make a mess of this. We need him able to speak.”

“Fine...” Lavender stepped back and let Rose handle things again. Her horn glowed in a healing aura that took Rocky’s pain away. “Rocky, be reasonable. I can be very good or very bad, it all depends on your cooperation.”

“My cooperation...” Rocky gasped. “What do you want?”

“Six weeks ago, a group of ponies attacked the leaders of Freedom Field. We found a chip of the Full House group among the attackers. Was your boss behind the operation?” I asked calmly but without a hint of mercy.

“N-no... I can’t say a word. If I do... Full House will have me killed.” Rocky whined.

“If you don’t, I will.” Lavender grunted and applied pressure on Rocky’s broken knees.

“YARRRGH!” Rocky gurgled.

“Mister Shade, I won’t do anything more to hold my companion back.” I said coldly. “It’s your choice now. Speak or face the consequences.”

“B-but I can’t... ARRRRGH!!” Lavender had broken Rocky’s front knees in a swift move.

“Mister Shade, our patience is running out.”

“Fine, fine!” Rocky yelled. “We’re the ones who ordered it! Full House knew all about the operation, and he was the one that paid the assassins! It was his idea all along! I was only the mediator, Full House is the one to blame! Now please, let me go!”

“Finish this charade, Lavender.” I ordered.

“With pleasure.”

Rocky’s neck snapped and he fell dead, tears and saliva still dripping off his face. It was a disgusting sight, and I quickly began to untie him; while thinking what to do with the corpse. I knew that this would happen, and after the treatment Lavender had given to poor Rocky we couldn’t just let him walk away. Not that he could, actually.

“I hope this was good for something.” Rose said while tidying up the bed.

“We got the answers we wanted.” I lifted Rocky’s body, which was heavier than expected, and dropped it on the wooden floor of the apartment. “Besides, that final line is pure gold.”

“The one blaming Full House?” Rose looked puzzled. “Why?”

“Because he frames him of hiring assassins. Who knows what we can do with that information.” I grinned maliciously.

“You’re always one step ahead, aren’t you?”

“I try to.” I lifted Rocky’s body once again and tried to carry it on my back. It was too heavy to drag it around just by force, so I would have to use my magic to compensate. “Remind me not to piss you off.”

“You mean Lavender, right?”

“Sure.” I grunted. “Don’t mess with Lavender. By the way, how did you manage to switch so quickly?”

“We’ve decided to cooperate. I think that both of us have the same goals, although we have different approaches towards them.”

“The same goals? Which ones?” I never expected that answer.

“I think the two of us strive to make the world a better place... a bit more just.”

“And you do so by being kind and righteous, while Lavender does so by... destroying those who propagate injustice?” It was a deep way of thinking, and it left me puzzled. I had always regarded Lavender as a bloodthirsty monster, and it was strange to see her turned into an avatar of fairness.

“More or less.” Rose shrugged. “I’ve realized that sometimes you must be a bit evil for the greater good. Having that other voice in my head was a tough ordeal, but she’s changed... the same as I have.”

“I must admit you have baffled me, Rose.” I couldn’t find a way to order my thoughts. “I feared that Lavender would take over you.”

“Me too.” Rose nodded. “I had to be very careful, but we’ve both adapted to our situation. I think it’s for the best, right?”

“Absolutely.” I smiled in relief.

“So, what are we going to do with him?” Rose asked.

“We can’t leave any trace behind, so I think we should dump him in the Wasteland.”

“Good idea.” Rose nodded. “Mind if I take a shower first? I’ve had my share of sweating too, and I’m starting to smell bad.”

“Sure. Go ahead.” I nodded and focused on thinking how to carry Rocky in a way that wouldn’t bring any suspicion upon us. Maybe a carpet would be of good use in this case...

“What the hell?” Rose yelled, making me break concentration and drop Rocky’s weight on me. I stumbled to the floor and let go a grunt of pain.

“What’s wrong, Rose?”

“Look!” Rose came running towards me, fully naked.

“What is it?” I freed myself from Rocky’s corpse and got back on my hooves. Rose was acting nervously and pranced from one side to the other.

“Look at my flank! It’s there!”

“At your flank? What are you talking about?”

“My Cutie Mark! It has appeared!!” Rose was floating in a bubble of glee. In my case, the arrival of my Cutie Mark had been a rather dull and forgettable moment, as the rest of my life in the Stable, but I could understand that, under normal circumstances, it had to be a significant moment in a pony’s life.

I looked at Rose’s flank, and noticed what she had been talking about. Where there was nothing more than pink fur, a clear symbol had appeared: a rose and a strand of lavender, coiled around a pair of scales. Rose and Lavender, working together for justice. It was a certain demonstration that it symbolized a pony’s greatest talent.

I smiled and I felt tears roll from my eyes. It was her achievement, but I felt it as mine... the filly I had saved from death in the Wasteland, that I had driven into the Stable, that I had ‘possessed’ with the evil being... that very filly had endured, had learnt, had grown up and had mastered her own destiny. Even after all the hardships she had been through, most of them because of me, she had become stronger and wiser. I hugged

her and began crying, like I had never cried before.

“Rose... congratulations...” I sobbed, after a while.

“Thank you, Farsight!” she hugged me back with a big smile on her face. “We made this... together.”

“No, you made it.” I held back the tears. “I put you through a ton of perils, and you got out by yourself.”

“Farsight, shut up.” Her tone was soothing yet firm, like a mother’s voice. “You gave me my life when you killed those raiders. I will forever be in debt with you. That’s final.”

“Rose...”

“Now stop crying and get a hold of yourself, for Luna’s sake!” Rose gave me a soft slap and smiled. “We have work to do! The world isn’t going to bow down to you just because, right?”

“True, so true.” I smiled and rubbed the tears from my face. “Let’s move!”

#

Note: Perk Added

E Pluribus Unum: Your guidance has helped Rose and Lavender join forces. You gain 10% speech when facing mares.

## Chapter 15: Woke Up This Morning

*“Hey there, good morning to all of you that have tuned in to this, your station, for your daily dose of energy! I am Mister New Pegasus and you’re listening to, obviously, New Pegasus Radio, bringing you the best music in the Wasteland, as well as regular news reports on the City of New Pegasus and the Neighvada Territory! You’ve been enjoying the best swinging tones of the Platinum Blues Band, live from the concert hall at the Platinum Horseshoe!*

*Speaking of which, dear listeners, I think we should feel proud of ourselves as a city, don’t you think? We can’t deny that the world is a harsh place, and that the Neighvada Territory, even if under the keen eye of the NER, is far from being a land where ponies live in communion and happiness. However, inside the walls we have every single thing we need to live in comfort, and after many years of careful work and effort, we’re now starting to develop a cultural offer capable of comparing itself with that of other past, more civilized times. Isn’t that something worth of our pride?*

*Now, patriotic speeches aside, let’s go with the news! First of all, we need to set our attention on our neighboring city of Freedom Field, where the local authorities and the NER delegation officially signed the treaty of Constitution of the Free City of Freedom Field, according to both their local rule and the Republican laws. The new mayor, Dee Cleff, formerly a well-known mob leader, spoke about the glorious fate of the township, about her plans as mayor to consolidate a path of growth and bright future for her people, and emplaced both the NER and the New Pegasus City Board to work together in order to make Neighvada a better place.*

*The response of the City Board was made by means of an official statement given to the press, where the Council Members welcomed Cleff’s proposal and demanded she focused on establishing a working security enforcement in Freedom Field, so that the former problems derived from the drugs market could be driven out of town. Now that both parties have laid their cards upon the table, it’s time to see who will perform the next move and who will wait.*

*On to matters of Neighvada and the rest of the known world! The Republic seems to be on the move once again, mares and gentlecolts! Now that the situation in Freedom Field and New Pegasus has reached a certain level of stability, it looks like the armies that the NER had deployed in Neighvada have begun a long march East, across Hooper Dam and towards the unknown lands of Coltorado. What lies beyond the sands is a mystery, and we wish the troopers good luck and a quick and healthy trip back home! As for what concerns local safety, the NER has guaranteed that a sufficient number of troops will stay in the Territory to ensure that things keep working as planned.*

*In local news, the time for the NPPD is running dangerously low on the Ferratura Murder Case. With no apparent new evidence or witnesses, it all points towards an early closure of the case with no culprits or explanations. Verrazano Ferratura has been seen entering the Police Station followed by his bodyguards, with an expression of true anger in his face. From here we sincerely hope that nopony has taken any rash decisions and that nopony has been hurt.*

*And that makes all that we had to tell you, folks! Stay tuned for further news updates, but for now, enjoy the best music between the Divide and Hooper Dam! I now leave you with Swinging Voice, the new crooner that’s filling concert halls all over town! Some say it’s his blue eyes, some say it’s his fantastic voice (his name says it, after all), but the truth is that getting a ticket for his shows is a real ordeal! For those of you who didn’t manage to get yours, here’s ‘Send Me To The Moon’! Remember, this is New Pegasus Radio, and I’m your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

The sun had just disappeared behind the thick cloud cover that turned the sky into a grey stone ceiling, its last rays pouring over the Wasteland like flaming arrows, when we returned from getting rid of the disgraced late Rocky Shade, former Chief of Security of the Platinum Horseshoe; and I was feeling quite burnt out by the activity of the last few hours. I guess that six weeks of inactivity had made my body unprepared for a sudden burst of physical effort.

We had hidden the deceased buck in a rolled carpet I had carried on my back without magic, just to avoid attracting unwanted attention. In case somepony should ask, we were heading for the caravan outpost in Nobuck to try and sell the piece of furniture. It was an odd reason, but the Wasteland was the home of the oddities; two ponies wanting to sell a carpet in the middle of the night wasn't the worst there was to see. Still, while in New Pegasus, we stuck to the side streets to avoid being seen.

Once out in the open Wastes, we could be a bit less careful and concentrate on moving quickly. We headed North, towards a salt flat I had located in the map of Neighvada. I chose that location because the white soil would act as a light concentrator, dehydrating the corpse of Rocky much faster than how it would in the open desert. Also, once we got there, Rose cut the body of the dead buck with a kitchen knife we had picked up at home, bleeding it dry out on the open. With a bit of luck, the scent of blood would attract predators.

With our job of taking out the trash done, we returned to the city. The carpet and the knife were conveniently forgotten in a ruined building a couple of hours away from the gates, and we entered Freedom Field without any evidence of what we had been doing outside; and by the time we got there, our former home was bubbling with activity. Many things had changed since we had become citizens of New Pegasus, and most of them made me feel satisfied of my job.

Under the rule of Dee Cleff, the city was undergoing a thorough cleaning process. Groups of labourer ponies built scaffoldings around the inhabited buildings, in order to scrape the dirt off the walls and give them a new layer of paint; others were working on those blocks that had been abandoned for a long time, checking for possible structural damages and repairing doors and windows; while some others patched up the cracked tarmac of the streets.

Apart from that, many new shops and venues had opened in the formerly empty premises of the main street. Convenience and grocery stores, cafés or even apparel sellers had appeared where there was nothing apart from dust and broken storefronts. What was more important for me, though, was the fact that many of the new locations had been established by former Wastelanders that had begun migrating into Freedom Field. The newly obtained stability was attracting population into town and making the economy boom.

“See this?” I said to Rose. “This is what we have achieved.”

I couldn't hide the pride in my voice. I knew that many ponies had collaborated to get that result, but I thought that I had been the instigator of such change. It wasn't that far fetched, after all.

“Hey, congratulations.” Rose smiled, with a hint of irony on her face. “Just don't let it get over your head.”

“Hell, Rose. Cut me some slack!” I laughed at her reply. “Don't you think we had something to do in all this?”

“Yes, no doubt, but don't get too cocky, Farsight. It's cool that you feel proud about having helped, but you're not the only one who did... and some folks are less tolerant towards proud ponies.”

“Where would I be without you, Rose?” I snickered.

We both laughed at the situation and walked on. I had to admit that Rose had been right in giving me the heads up. So far, my cold and rational mind had been what had helped us survive and carry our plans forward, and pride without control was one of the easiest ways to send all our previous achievements down the drain.

When walking close to Trader Plaza, something caught my attention. An old building that had always been abandoned, with all windows and doors shut by wooden planks and bricks, had been thoroughly repaired and repainted, and now makeshift banners with the colors and the emblems of the four gangs of Freedom Field hung from masts in the top floor. A large billboard let me know that we were staring at the newly opened Town Hall.

“Seen that?” I patted Rose on the back.

“Seen what?”

“That.” I pointed towards the Town Hall. “It wasn't there before.”

“You’re right!” Rose gasped in awe. “It’s amazing!”

“I would hardly call it amazing.” I shrugged. “I have to admit, though, that they’ve done a fine job restoring the building.”

“Come on, Farsight!” Rose bumped me. “You are being a little unfair, you know?”

“Unfair? Seriously?” I grimaced.

“Well, it seems like since you became a New Pegasus citizen you’ve turned into a bit of a snob.” Rose spoke with calm dignity. “I hope you haven’t forgotten that this keeps being the Wasteland, and that getting proper materials is a complex job.”

“I know that.” I responded calmly. “I also know that NER caravans come and go without trouble now, so the biggest problem the builders will have to face is paying for the bricks and glass the Republic brings from beyond the Divide.”

“You always need to say the last word, don’t you?” Rose grunted.

I paid no attention to the last remark the filly had done and walked calmly into the Town Hall lobby. As expected, there was no sign of grandeur inside the building, as it had been reconverted out of an old housing block, and the common spaces were not meant to be used in such an official way. Still, whoever had worked in the restoration had done a fine job adjusting the lighting, polishing the floors and painting the walls in soothing colours.

A young buck stood behind the entrance counter, working on a small terminal that hummed softly in the silence of the room. As soon as he noticed us both entering, he lifted his head from the screen and composed a professional smile. It was surprising to see a stallion behind an entrance counter, but in all fairness, I had to admit that there was no good reason to restrict those jobs to mares only.

“Good morning!” The receptionist greeted us kindly. “What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to speak to the Mayor, please.” I replied with a smile on my face.

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“In that case…”

“I know, she will be busy.” I let go a soft laugh. “Please, I insist. Maybe if you let her know that Farsight is wanting to speak to her…”

Mentioning my name made the receptionist react. He didn’t immediately let us in, but he began to type something in the computer. A moment later, the terminal beeped and the buck smiled, turning back to us.

“Of course, mister Farsight. Mayor Cleff will be with you in a moment. Please follow me.”

The young stallion got out from behind the counter and climbed the stairs towards the upper floors, guiding us to Dee’s office, which was located in the uppermost level of the Town Hall. It must have been a small penthouse apartment like Stuka’s, but all the walls had been torn down to leave room for a magnificent open space, decorated with taste and elegance. Shelves with books, both old and new, covered two of the walls, while the one behind Dee’s large desk consisted of a large glass door leading to a large terrace that overlooked Trader Plaza.

Dee and Nadyr were waiting for us outside, chatting calmly while having a nice cup of coffee. As soon as we got there, they waved and told us to join them, which we did gladly. After all we had been through, some rest would be appreciated.

“Morning, you two!” Dee smiled and greeted us in a motherly voice.

“Morning, Dee.” I whistled in admiration. “Nice place you’ve set up here. I must admit I’m amazed.”

“Hey!” Rose laughed. “You’ve just said you didn’t find it amazing!”

“Yes, yes, you’re right.” I lowered my head in pretended shame. “Every pony makes mistakes, however, only the wise ones make amends.”

“Whatever...” Rose huffed.

“So good to see you, bro.” Nadyr gave me a tight hug. He looked good, fulfilled. “It looks like New Pegasus is treating you well.”

“It is, indeed.” I smiled and freed myself from his embrace. “But it looks like Dee is treating you even better!”

Both Dee and Nadyr laughed softly and looked at each other with a happy, even lovey face.

“I’ll admit it. She’s one hell of a mare.”

“Thank you, my moon and stars.” Dee gave the half-zebra a quick, gentle kiss. “You know, Farsight, when all this marriage charade started, I assumed this would be a burden I would have to carry on me for the good of the city. It turns out that I was wrong.”

“Oh please, stop it!” Nadyr giggled.

“I mean it, Naddy. You’re the best buck I’ve ever met, and you’ll be a great father.”

“Father?” I gasped. “Does that mean...?”

“Yes, bro!” Nadyr laughed. “I’m going to be a papa soon!”

“Congratulations!” This time I was the one to hug Nadyr. After all we had been through, I had developed a sense of responsibility for my companion, more so considering that I had been the one pushing him to marry Dee.

“Yay!” Rose squeed. “Is it going to be a filly or a foal?”

“We still don’t know.” Dee smiled gently. “Nor do we care, really.”

“Exactly.” Nadyr said with determination. “Does it even make a difference, though?”

“Not really.” I smiled.

“Well, enough of my pregnancy, folks!” Dee swiftly changed subject with her usual calm dominance. “What about you two shiny Citizens? Any news?”

Rose giggled.

“I think you should show it to them.” I nodded.

“Show us what?” Dee seemed puzzled.

Rose giggled and moved her clothes so that one of her flanks was on clear sight, showing her newly-acquired Cutie Mark to our two friends, who showed - or even overacted a tiny bit - their amazement at Rose’s new feat.

“Rose! Congratulations!” Dee embraced Rose tightly, while Nadyr gave her a friendly pat on the head.

“Good job, missy. I knew you were about to discover your forte.”

“Thank you!” Rose was on the verge of crying out of joy.

“What does it symbolize?” Dee asked.

“Justice.” Rose replied proudly. “My two halves working together towards it.”

“Two halves?”

“Yes, the rose and the lavender... me and Lavender.”

“Wait a minute. Wasn’t Lavender the psycho?” Nadyr stuttered.

“Yes, but it’s under control.” Rose giggled. “But who are you calling psycho?” Lavender’s voice suddenly

appeared.

“Whoa!” Nadyr jumped back, startled. Lavender laughed honestly, and so did we all. Just a little joke.

“Take it easy, Nadyr.” Lavender smiled. “I was just making a guest appearance. You have nothing to fear from me. Now, if you don’t need anything more...” She blinked, and her voice changed. “Don’t blame her, she’s like that.” Rose was back on the saddle.

“Congratulations, nonetheless.” Dee smiled kindly.

“Thank you!” Rose smiled in return, being utterly adorable.

I walked to the railing at the far end of the terrace and took a look down at Trader Plaza. From that privileged point of view one could see all the ponies come and go, the stands crammed one against the other, the caravans coming and leaving... one could see the city live and one could assume the Plaza was its beating heart, pulsating with activity. I did notice the presence of another building close to the marketplace which had been renewed, and where a NER flag was waving in the morning wind.

“The NER has an embassy here?” I asked.

“Not really an embassy.” Dee came close and sneered. “Just a lower delegation, subordinate to that of New Pegasus. A bunch of good-for-nothing pencil pushers, really.”

“You don’t seem too happy.”

“Well, it’s not that I had many expectations when I signed the treaty...” Dee sighed in dismay. “But at least I supposed the NER would act as a mediator with New Pegasus.”

“Really? Is there a conflict?” It was a surprising revelation. I hadn’t noticed anything from the other side of the wall.

“I would hardly call it a conflict.” Dee raised a brow. “It’s more of a growing nuisance, really. Still, I wish the NER would do something about it.”

“What is it? Maybe I can help you from the inside.”

“Thanks, Farsight. I appreciate it.” Dee nodded softly. “Since we signed the treaty, we’ve had an increase in New Pegasus citizens moving from one side to the other of the barrier. Most of them are nice folks, they spend their caps in our shops, some of them have even made investments in real estate and business opportunities, but we’ve had some unwanted individuals coming along as well.”

“Unwanted as in...?”

“Unwanted as in goons, Farsight. When you see groups of four or five heavily armed stallions in suits with a winged horse shoe pin on their lapelles, acting smug and violent; you don’t really need to ask what they’re up to.”

A winged horse shoe... could that be the Ferratura emblem?

“I get it.” I nodded in understanding. “What kind of problems have they been causing?”

“They’re coercing the shop owners. From what I’ve heard, they’re telling them that all of us leaders, that is me, Ampera, Saddle and Mixer...”

“Mixer?”

“Yes, Mixer, the potions expert. Don’t you know him?”

“Rotten and with a funny accent? Yes, I do.” I smiled at the thought of the Trottingham ghoul I had met so long ago. “I just supposed that the Followers would have disbanded after Goldie’s death.”

“They’re not the Followers anymore. They now call themselves the Healers’ Guild.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“I agree. All that messianic bullshit was a bit too much for my head.” Dee grunted. “The thing is, those goons

are telling the folks in town that we are too concentrated in our own profits to properly protect them.”

“Protect them from whom?” I smiled maliciously.

“Exactly.” Dee smiled with bad intention. “I fear they’re plotting a takeover and they’re doing recon duty. That’s why I’ve sent several complaints to the NER delegation, but it’s been of no use.”

“I think I know who those goons are representing, and I might be able to help you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, or at least so I hope.” I stretched a bit and shook my head. “Remember the attack on your wedding?”

“How can I forget?” Dee mumbled in anger.

“I recently found out that one of the two mob leaders in New Pegasus, Full House, was the one that gave the order to execute the attack. The rival mob, the Ferraturas, will probably be wanting to make use of that attack to convince the population of Freedom Field that they are the only ones who can keep them effectively safe from House’s mob; since it was clearly demonstrated during the wedding that the local gangs can’t anticipate an attack.”

“Those disgraceful bastards...” Dee clenched her teeth.

“Yes, those are my thoughts exactly. Still, I have an idea on how to avoid them focusing on your territory.”

“And that idea is...”

“Giving them something more important to concentrate in.” I smiled cunningly while looking towards the open Wastes.

“You and your machiavellian plans, Farsight.” Dee grinned. “It’s good to know that you’re on our side.”

“Honestly, Dee, I think that you would be one of the few ponies that would see me coming.”

We both laughed dryly, confirming that we didn’t fully trust each other. Still, we got along good enough to be able to share good moments and to work together.

“Oh well.” Dee had a honest smile on her face. “We’ve always walked down separate paths, even if they are parallel right now. It’s not like that is to change anytime soon.”

“I don’t think we need to talk about it, do we?” I said, thoughtfully.

“Not at all.” Dee nodded. “So, what are you planning to do now?”

“Me?” I laughed dimly. “The same thing I do every day: try to take over the world.”

“Newsflash, Farsight. That’s exactly what you’ve been doing ever since you came to Freedom Field.”

“Fine, fine, have it your way.” I shrugged with a half grin in my face. “I’ll try to get rid of those Ferratura pests for you, alongside other things I have to deal with.”

“Good, in that case, I wish you the best of luck.” Dee took a deep breath and turned around, towards her office. “I’ve got a lot of things to do too, and a Mayor’s job doesn’t wait for me to stop faffing about, as much as I would love to keep enjoying the morning with you.”

“Of course, Dee. It’s better if we get moving as well.” I followed Dee. “Rose!”

“Coming!” she replied. “Bye, Nadyr!”

“Bye, you two!” Nadyr waved goodbye from the other end of the terrace. He was rich, married and he didn’t have to work for a living. That was actual paradise for him.

“See you later, Nadyr!” I turned to Dee once again and gave her a kind hoofshake. “Dee, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Good luck in New Pegasus, Farsight. I think you’ll need it.”

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Back in the Strip, I began to think on how to tackle the next phase of my plan. In a conceptual level, it was pretty simple: two factions were contending for the supremacy over the city, and the situation at the time was that of a cold war with a potential casus belli looming around, that is, the murder of young Sandmound. Speaking figuratively, one could say that the balance in New Pegasus was unstable, and any minimal perturbation would cause that equilibrium to come crashing down.

However, I had to concentrate on the practical issues. I had little doubt that the chip and the recording of Rocky's confession would give me the edge I needed to convince the Ferratura Family to support my scheme to start a conflict between the two mobs. Still, I couldn't just pretend them to do the strategic thinking, or they would dump me aside, probably with a bullet to the head, if Verrazano was as aggressive and ruthless as Badge had told me. Therefore, I needed to make myself irreplaceable for them.

Proposing an all-out frontal attack was ridiculous. That had never worked before, and it never would now. I needed to find out something less exposed, and at the same time, more effective to cripple Full House and his activities. There were many options: sabotage, defamatory campaigns, kidnappings... Still, the one that appeared to be more attractive to me was robbery. After all, money was the fuel that powered every single thing in that city, so making him bankrupt was an elegant way to take Full House out of the picture.

Then, once the mysterious owner of the Platinum Horseshoe had been turned into a pauper, I could use my gold reserves to take his place and outlast the Ferratura Family in a war for domination. Don't get me wrong, though. I knew that I was going way over my head, and that any wrong move could get me killed without hesitation, but if I had been able to use my wits to prosper in Freedom Field and earn my place in New Pegasus, I didn't see why I wouldn't be able to climb the ladder to the very top.

To pull off a proper sting on the Horseshoe, though, I needed to know where the main safe was located, which security measures the Casino had, and whether there was a way into the insides of the facility that didn't imply being seen by half of the city's population. In a nutshell, I needed a hell of a lot of data, and I had a hunch about where to find them.

The Library kept being a sort of an oddity among the gambling halls and luxury restaurants of the Strip, a hulking red building that struggled to harness the remnants of the culture of the Old World in the vortex of chaos that was the New World. Behind the ornate counter, a golden mare with green mane that I had already met some time ago was sorting a pile of books with a face of evident boredom. When she saw me enter, her expression showed how, out of every single pony in Equestria, she would never have expected me coming back.

"What in Celestia's name are you doing here?" she asked, visibly disturbed.

"Tracker, please..." I gave her my warmest smile, although she didn't find it very calming. "It's been a long story, but what's past is past, OK?"

"How do you know my name? I don't remember having told you."

"You didn't." I spoke softly, to try and gain her confidence. "Captain Badge did, when I was taken to the Police Station."

"I see..." Tracker hesitated. "Well, about that..."

"I told you that it's a thing of the past now. I don't hold any kind of grudge against you, I come here because I honestly need your help."

"Mind telling me your name, so that we're on equal terms?" Once I told her that I wasn't there for vengeance, she returned to her usual brusque self.

"Sheesh, where are my manners?" I whined. "My name is Farsight, nice to meet you."

"Cut it out, Farsight." She grinned ironically. "Now, would you be so kind to explain me how the hell are you here, in front of me, after I saw you being dragged out by two roboponies?"

"I said it's a very long story, but in a nutshell, I managed to buy myself a Citizenship Card. With that in my pocket, I'm free to come and go. That's why I'm with you now."

“Whatever...” Tracker groaned. “I’m not going to dig any deeper... Somehow, I have the feeling that I wouldn’t like to know the details.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you anyway.”

“Good to know.” Tracker shrugged.

“I see that you two had some unfinished business to settle... but is this going to take much longer?” Rose whined from behind. “I’m hungry, I told you we shouldn’t have skipped breakfast.”

“Wait a minute. Is that yours?” Tracker smiled broadly, with the word ‘irony’ almost written in her face.

“No, it’s not mine.” I frowned. “We met in the Wasteland, and we teamed up. She’s turned out to be a valuable companion.”

“I won’t judge, but it’s a FILLY.”

“Tracker, you’re getting things wrong, I never meant...”

“Watch what you say, ma’am!” Rose interrupted loudly. “I’ve already have my Cutie Mark, so don’t patronize me!”

“Easy now, little one.” Tracker looked at Rose with smug satisfaction. “You’re still a filly, and that’s a fact.”

“Tracker, please,” I spoke coldly, trying to stop the argument from escalating. “I’ve come for a reason, so let’s get down to pressing matters.”

“The sooner we begin, the sooner we’ll finish.” Tracker shrugged. “What are you looking for?”

“I need to know if there is a side entrance to the Platinum Horseshoe, preferably to the lower levels.”

Tracker’s expression changed suddenly, from clear disinterest to unhidden satisfaction.

“Wait a minute. Are you telling me that you want to sneak into Full House’s casino?”

“No, I’m telling you that I want to discover a way to get into it. Anything beyond that is your interpretation.” I softened my expression. “Still, it looks like the idea of breaking into the Horseshoe is something that turns you on.”

“Not in that strict sense, but more or less.” Tracker nodded.

“May I ask why?”

“Look, I don’t get into politics. That’s not my thing, really. However, I can’t stand the way Full House is taking over New Pegasus, with his robots and his attitude of smug superiority. I don’t like the Ferraturas either, but if House carries on acting like he’s the King of the Hill, things are going to get ugly, quickly. I don’t want that to happen, and I can assure you that almost nopony in town does either. The problem lies on the fact that we have nothing to do against any of the two mobs.”

“That being the case, will you help me find a way of crippling him a bit?” I winked.

“Of course!” Tracker left the pile of books and trotted out of her spot, heading towards one of the galleries of the library. “Follow me!”

We kept close to the suddenly friendly librarian while she took us through aisles of books, newspapers and documents; until we got into a small storage room where large cardboard rolls were tidily placed on shelves. She jumped onto a small stool and quickly browsed through a series of containers until she picked one up.

“Found it!”

“What is this place exactly, Tracker?” I asked out of sheer curiosity.

“This is a storage room.” The librarian huffed ironically. “The contents of the room are interesting, though. All these rolls store the blueprints of the street and sewer level networks of New Pegasus. They should have been kept in the Town Hall, but some bright mind decided to pile them here.”

“Lucky coincidence.” I whistled.

“Very lucky.” Tracker opened the cardboard tube and unrolled the blueprint on a table. “This should be the one of the Horseshoe... wait a minute!” Tracker cursed.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, while I walked close to the table.

“The blueprint is incomplete! It doesn’t show the internal layout of the Casino!”

“Nopony said it would be easy...” I mumbled, looking at the myriad of lines and dots.

I concentrated on the map of the sewers surrounding the large blank area that was Full House’s stronghold. Many tunnels coiled around our target, but none of them seemed to have a way into it; not even a sewage output we could crawl through. I had to admit that I was starting to get dizzy trying to decode the small annotations and symbols that plagued the large sheet of yellowing paper. Tracker grunted unintelligible words while she moved to one side and the other of the table, tackling the search from different angles; but she didn’t appear to be finding anything either.

“What’s this symbol here?” Rose asked, pointing at a small box on one of the walls of the Casino.

“What?” Tracker snapped out of her concentration. “Let me look... that’s a bloody blast door! I can’t believe I haven’t seen it before!”

“A blast door? That means there is a way in!” I pranced.

“It might be locked from the inside...” Tracker bent over the blueprint. “Nope, it’s got a two-way terminal lock. It can be accessed from the sewers.”

“That’s perfect, it’s just what I need.” I smiled broadly. “Thanks, Tracker.”

“Don’t mention it.” Tracker packed the blueprint in the roll and left it on the shelf. “Give House some hell for me, will you?”

“With pleasure.” I laughed and left the room with Rose following me. It was time to take another step forward.

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The Clops was the largest Casino in New Pegasus, a massive resort that almost doubled the size of the Platinum Horseshoe and that could be seen from almost everywhere in town. The only thing House had done better than the Ferraturas, at least when comparing both buildings, was having erected a tall spire that towered over all the Strip and gave the Horseshoe a certain sense of dominance above its competitor.

From an aesthetic point of view, however, I preferred the Clops. I found it to be more welcoming and less imposing than its rival; despite the disproportionate size. House had built a monument to a certain vision of progress, a shiny, bright and often cold metal husk that seemed to match well with the robot workforce he employed to keep both his Casino and the town safe. The Ferraturas had stuck to something classic, a mixture of red stone, bright wood and dim lights that transmitted warmth and coziness, although some areas kept being too dark for my taste.

The main gambling hall was a large open space, covered by a stone dome painted with motifs of open skies and pegasi flying around the sun, while archways with fake plants coiled around the columns formed a perimeter in which many of the players took a rest before returning to the tables to burn their caps on rigged games. That place brought back memories of the illusionary Neighborleans casino, where I had played for an invitation against Agent Conneighry. This place, however, was very real.

Apart from the main Casino, the Clops had another plethora of features Rose and I explored carefully before trying our luck with the Ferraturas. A grand auditorium was hosting the daily shows of crooners such as Dino Maretino, who seemed to be quite a celebrity in town; although I had never heard of him. I guess I should have listened to the radio a bit more often. Still, even if not used at the moment we walked into it, I felt awestruck by the dimensions and the intrinsic grandeur it had. The Ferraturas could be ruthless mobsters, but they did have a taste for culture and elegance.

Another wing of the complex hosted a food court with three restaurants offering different cuisines for diverse

tastes and pockets, or that was what their advertisement said. I had honestly no idea about how the Ferraturas were managing to obtain the ingredients to offer Appleloosan and Roaman dishes, as well as so-called 'Wastelander delicacies'; but the place was clean, the service was diligent and, as we quickly found out, the food was above the usual standard. The price was a bit steep, true, but it was nothing we couldn't handle.

With our late breakfast on the table, Rose felt comfortable and even a bit talkative. We had been over quite a lot lately, so I really wanted to set things straight with her before moving on.

"How do you want to do this, Farsight?" she asked, before I was able to mutter a single word.

"Do what?"

"You wanted to speak to the Ferratura leaders, didn't you?"

"Yes, that's my plan."

"Well, that's my question. How are you planning the conversation?"

"Hm... I don't know; and I won't know until we're face to face. To begin with, I'm not even sure they'll listen to us, although I think we have powerful reasons for them to give us a chance... Still, it all depends on who we talk to. Verrazano is very aggressive, so I guess I could benefit from that hot blood to have him screaming for vengeance. Delvio, on the other hoof, seems to be a much more patient and reflexive buck. Personally, I think I would get along much better with him, but somehow I fear that he'll be harder to convince. After all, our evidence is feeble."

"Not to mention fabricated." Rose giggled.

"Exactly." I laughed calmly at her clever remark. "However, that is something we DON'T want them to know."

"Don't worry, Farsight. I won't even hint it." Rose winked an eye confidently. "Have you considered having to speak to Novalis?"

"Novalis? That would be a serious challenge. If we take Badge's word for granted, he's as patient and stern as Delvio, but I suppose he'll be much more cunning, considering he's been the leader of the Family for many years. Nopony said it was going to be easy, though."

"Of course, but I trust you will be able of doing things your way." Rose smiled in a way that warmed my heart.

"Speaking of trust, Rose..." I wondered about how to pose the question.

"What, Farsight?"

"Rose, you've been the most honorable and fair pony I've met... even your Cutie Mark reflects that. Still, you follow me everywhere I go, and back me up in every plan... although I know my plans are far from being acts of justice."

"Yes, so what?"

"Well, it baffles me." I shrugged.

"Why? I owe you my life, for starters. Besides, you've been completely selfless when it comes to me, and I know in my heart that everything you do has a legitimate reason."

"Really? What about the Maretairie ghouls?"

"I know that one was a bit tough for me to swallow..." Rose nodded. "Still, I realized that their life was a countdown to madness, so I believe we did a good thing in the end."

"What about Goldie? I killed her in cold blood."

"Her treason cost Stuka her life." Rose's tone lowered to Lavender's pitch. "None of them should have died, but actions have consequences. If it hadn't been you, Dee would have had her executed. At least, you had a minimum sense of closure."

I nodded in amazement at Rose's answers. Not so long ago, she had been a defender of life above all things. The change in behaviour could have been Lavender's doing?

"Farsight, I don't know what confuses you so much. It is true that I have been a defender of lost causes before, but I've grown up, and with your help, I've seen things that have made me think. Sometimes ponies must die, in all fairness. Death is a part of life, especially in the Wastelands, and trying to save everypony's life is a simplistic approach to a complex world. You knew that, and now I do too."

"I never expected to hear that from you." I smiled dimly.

"Hah!" Rose laughed. "Does that mean I've outsmarted you?"

"You could say so!" I laughed too, and did a theatrical bow. "The apprentice has beaten the master. Remind me to buy you something to remember this moment."

"Come on, cut it out!" Rose smiled and waved a hoof disregarding my offer. "I've learnt that one must strive to be coherent with her principles in life. So far, you've always showed such coherence, and that's why I follow you and try to learn as much as I can from you, day after day."

"I guess I should feel honored by that." I smiled dimly.

"It's your call." Rose shrugged. "So, now that we've settled this matter... what should we do?"

"We could keep exploring this place. I have the feeling that we haven't seen even half of it."

"I've overheard that the back end of the building hosts a massive brothel, so unless you feel like going for a quickie, I suggest we avoid doing that."

"Hm... fair enough." I nodded. "Now we need to find out how to talk to the big bosses."

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It took us much less than we expected to become noticed within the Clops. As soon as I told a croupier that I had valuable information that I wanted to share with the Don and his family, two goons in black suits appeared behind us and almost dragged us into a side room. To be honest, they never put a hoof on us, but their behaviour was clearly intimidatory and violent. Clearly, they didn't trust unknown ponies that walked into the Casino demanding to speak to the big bosses.

The chamber we had been forced into was the complete opposite of those outside. All trace of taste and elegance had gone, and it had been replaced with coarse oppressiveness. The walls were made out of concrete with cracks and stains of moisture appearing here and there; the cold neon lighting painted shaky shadows on the wall; and a steel frame table stood lonely in the middle of the room.

"I don't like this one bit..." Rose, or more precisely Lavender, grunted. "It looks like a trap to me."

"I have the same feeling. However, they haven't taken our weapons away, so I doubt they'll try anything rough... yet."

"Please, don't think so badly of us. We're not raiders!"

That last voice had come from behind us, where a lila unicorn mare on a blue business suit had entered the small room we were waiting in. Her mane, cut short, formed waves of different blues on top of her head. She was carrying a small folder with her, and her expression was calm and a bit frivolous, as if she was totally aware of being in control of the situation.

"Don't get me wrong." I shrugged and smiled, trying to hide my alertness. "I've been through my share of ambushes and tight situations, that's why I was acting like that. I hope that you'll excuse us for our rudeness."

"There's nothing to forgive, sir. I understand your reaction, but I wanted to make things clear from the very beginning."

"Then it's all understood!" I faked my most sincere smile, although in the inside, I realized that our situation required extreme caution. "Who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?"

“Oh, my name is of no importance.” The mare waved a hoof, disregarding my question. “I’m just a trusted employee of Don Ferratura and his family. My function here is only to verify whether your proposal is of interest for my bosses before arranging a meeting with them.”

“Fair enough. What is it you require from us?” I still didn’t like her, nor did I like the charade we were playing.

“So far, the only thing we know about you is that you claim to have information that might be of my employers’ interest. I’d appreciate it if you would elaborate a bit, please.”

“I hope you understand that secrecy and confidentiality are vital for us. The data we are carrying would compromise us if they were revealed to the public.”

“Have no fear, sir. You have my word, and the word of the Don, that whatever you tell me will not leave this room.”

“That will have to do.” I shrugged, showing discomfort, but I realized I needed to abide her conditions if I wanted to carry on. “Please listen closely, for I will only say it once. I have a confession regarding the murder of the heir of the Family, Sandmound Ferratura.”

“Do you?” The mare showed surprise, and for once, I thought it was sincere. “Where are you carrying it?”

“It’s been recorded in my PipBuck.”

“Could you play it? Just to verify...”

“Sorry, but that is a no-go.” I shook my head vigorously to emphasize that I wasn’t going to play my only card there. “As I said, this is very delicate information, and I only intend to play it in front of the Don and his trusted ponies.”

“I’m a trusted pony of the Don!” she huffed.

“Don’t get me wrong, ma’am.” I raised a forehoof, asking for patience. “I never meant to imply that you’re not trusted; but my conditions stand and are unalterable: I will only reveal the confession I’m carrying when the Don is listening.”

“This is highly unorthodox.” The mare curled his muzzle graciously.

“I am aware of that.” I glared at her sternly. “However, I am also aware that the situation is highly extraordinary, and I suppose that such a context should allow for some more... uncommon measures.”

“My orders are clear, though. I need to confirm the validity of your material.”

“Ma’am, being a nuisance is not my intention. However, you’re making me act like this.” I frowned. “If you insist on your demands, I will have no other choice than to head to the NPPD with my information. I thought that the Ferratura Family would be grateful to know who the murderer of Sandmound was, but apparently, I was completely mistaken.” I turned around and headed for the door, looking at Rose. “Let’s go.”

Rose nodded and followed me quickly, while the mare seemed to ponder her options. I deliberately took my time to leave the room, as I expected what was about to happen.

“Sir, wait!” The mare called, obviously uncomfortable, but forced by my actions. “It’s OK, I shall take you to the Don.”

“See? I know we could reach an agreement.” I smiled smugly, enjoying my petty victory over her. “Please, lead the way.”

Visibly displeased, the mare exited the room and walked along corridors and halls, taking us to meet the big bosses of the Ferratura Family. If a glorified secretary like the one we had been faced with had been such a tight situation, I felt a sudden vertigo thinking about how we would have to deal with Verrazano and Delvio. That had become a do-or-die situation, and a wrong word could have us suffering a similar fate to poor Rocky Shade.

A few doors crossed later, we entered what apparently was the most private area of the facility, a wing of the

complex where the furniture was visibly better, the walls had been paneled with wood and the floor had been covered with thick, comfortable rugs. The noise of the Casino was kept properly muffled with thick walls, and soft music came out of speakers that were positioned every few steps.

The mare brought us to a small antechamber where two suited goons made us leave our guns to their custody. Not that much of a surprise, really, considering that we were about to face some of the most important ponies in New Pegasus; but one couldn't help feeling a bit helpless and alert when separated from his trusted weapons. Luckily for us, though, we had a weapon they wouldn't be able to hold back in case things became really ugly: Lavender. I just hoped, for our own good, that we didn't have to use it.

Once removed of our guns and ammo, the far door of the antechamber opened and we walked into a large room, entirely covered in bright wood and luxurious carpets; up to the point that one could think that the War had never taken place in there. The morning light sipped through the large arched windows located at both sides of the hall, shadowing what stood in the far end.

The door slammed shut behind us, leaving us with no other chance than to walk forward, towards the dark end of the room. As soon as we left the brighter area behind us, our eyes got used to the new environment. Right in front of us, two stallions were standing behind a large table, one relaxing on a couch and the other cautiously searching through a series of papers. Behind them, almost hidden by shadows, other three ponies were watching; but their martial stance and their outfit revealed them as bodyguards. The two in the middle had to be the Ferratura brothers.

The one on the couch was fat and unfit, an ochre-coated mass of muscle and fat whose fiery red mane was balding at the front of his head. Despite his apparent flabbiness, there was something utterly menacing about him, the latent threat of a sudden attack or a treacherous move; as if his aura inspired awe, even if he was wearing an old tracksuit. I assumed he had to be Verrazano, the elder brother, who was constantly trying to start a war with Full House.

The other pony, younger and much skinnier, looked more like a glorified accountant than a mob boss. His coat was grey-green and his mane, cut to middle length in a moment of rash individuality, was golden. He wore a sandstone-colored suit, but the jacket had been left aside and he was only wearing the shirt and trousers, held by suspenders. He was constantly going back and forth through a pile of papers on the table, and seemed far less dangerous than his brother. Still, one couldn't trust the diplomatic ones... I was one of them, after all.

"Gentlecolts..." I greeted with a courteous bow.

"Who's this prick?" Verrazano grunted. His voice was deep and rough. "What do you want?"

"My name is Farsight, sir. I have come to you with some relevant informations regarding the murder of your son and nephew, Sandmound."

"Ah, yes, Farsight..." Delvio spoke with a calm and almost whispering voice, without raising his head from the papers. "Born in Stable 188, cast out around eight months ago. Victim of the Citizenship restriction and exiled to Freedom Field. Began working as a scavenger-trader, then moved up to become agent and advisor of Dee Cleff, current mayor of our neighboring town. Ties with the NER, who vouched for you in your plea for a Citizen Card; which you obtained six weeks ago. As you see, you've caused quite an impression."

Having been tracked so closely was quite unsettling, to be honest, and I realized that Delvio could be as dangerous as his ruthless elder brother. Anyway, it was a matter of time that somepony pulled the psychological warfare trick on me, and the young Ferratura brother was a worthy contender in that field. I was starting to like his style.

"OK, I admit it, I'm impressed." I let go a subtle laugh. "Do you give all your visitors a background check?"

"Only to those we don't like at first glance." Delvio looked at me eye to eye. His gaze denoted a sharp wit, used to being in control of things. "Besides, you haven't been very discreet when moving around."

"I've tried to keep a low profile." I shrugged. "Sometimes it's just impossible, though."

"I'll give you that." Delvio nodded without much interest.

“Delvs, stop it.” Verrazano barked. “OK, my time is precious, so speak up. What the hell are you up to?”

“Verrazano Ferratura, I presume.” I looked at the fat stallion.

“Yes.” He grunted. “Stop playing with my patience.”

“Naturally.” I smiled, trying to be as soothing as possible. “As I told your mare before, I have a confession regarding Sandmound’s murder.”

“Do you?” Verrazano looked at me with mistrust. “The cops haven’t been able to get a single word, how did you manage to do that?”

“Well, let’s say that our methods are... unorthodox.” I raised my hoof and looked at it with a smug attitude. “I might have broken a rule or two in the process.”

“You don’t say.” Verrazano smiled. It looked like a predator’s grin while looking at the prey.

“Who was the unlucky pony?” Delvio looked at me questioningly.

“Mister Rocky Shade.”

“Oh, good old Rocky?” Delvio forced a half grin. “The poor fellow is paranoid, though. How did you manage to get to him?”

“It took some feminine intervention to overcome his defences, but after that, he jumped into the trap head on.”

“They always fall for pussy.” Verrazano sentenced.

“Brother, please.” Delvio sighed. “Where are your manners?”

“I’m a Don, Delvs! I don’t need to worry about manners.”

“Ver, Pappa is still the Don. We’re working on his behalf, so stop acting like a massive cunt.”

“Delvs, if I put my hoof on you...”

“You won’t, and you know it.” Delvio said cuttingly. “Listen, once Pappa is no more, you can do as you wish. You’re the heir now, and I will obey. However, you should listen to me sometimes. Right now, for example, you’re not looking like a serious leader in front of these ponies.”

“Delvio, if I may...” I interrupted kindly. “I understand and support your attitude towards your brother, but trust me, I’ve been confronted to much worse ponies. I won’t be scandalized that easily.”

“There you go, Delvs. Calm down.” Verrazano grinned triumphant.

“Whatever you say, brother.” Delvio raised his brows in dismay. “Farsight, how did you get to Rocky? I mean, was it a shot in the dark or did you have more proof?”

“It is a bit of a long story.” I cleared my throat. “You have mentioned that I was exiled to Freedom Field. Well, that day I came across a police officer called Brass Badge, who had been a Stable outcast as well. I guess that our common origin sparked some fondness in him.”

“Brass Badge. What a useless prick.” Verrazano huffed.

“Brother, please.” Delvio shook his head. “Carry on.”

“As I was saying, I must have left an impression, because some time after I returned to New Pegasus, he came to me offering me a job as a freelance investigator. He wanted somepony who could profit of being unknown to the masses in order to snoop more information. I was given access to the archives, and while browsing through the Sandmound file, I came across this.”

I flung the chip onto the table, where Delvio grabbed it and began inspecting it thoroughly. His face showed that he hadn’t seen that coming; which meant good news for me. I was starting to break their mistrust.

“A Platinum Horseshoe chip, stained with blood... Where did they find it?”

“I don’t know. To be honest, the chip was hidden in a corner of the box, as if somepony didn’t want it to be found. I have the feeling that the NPPD wants to let this die down slowly. Not that I blame them, though.”

“Neither would I...” Delvio sighed, before Verrazano could mutter a single word. “Still, such incompetence will have to be dealt with, as soon as all this is behind us.”

“Of course, that is yours to decide.” I nodded. “With that evidence, we chose to move outside the boundaries to obtain confirmation on our theory.”

“Your theory?” Verrazano grumbled.

“Basically, we believed that Full House was the one behind the assassination; but we needed proof before blaming anypony.”

“Very thoughtful of you.” Delvio admitted. “So, you said you moved outside the boundaries?”

“Outside the legal limits, yes. We could say that our questioning of Rocky didn’t comply with all basic rights.”

“Whatever!” Verrazano shook and leapt onto his hooves. “Did you get a confession?”

“Most certainly.” I fiddled with my PipBuck and replayed the recording. Rocky’s crying voice echoed in the large hall as the audiolog was broadcast from my hoofheld device.

*“Fine, fine! We’re the ones who ordered it! Full House knew all about the operation, and he was the one that paid the assassins! It was his idea all along! I was only the mediator, Full House is the one to blame! Now please, let me go!”*

“That’s some serious evidence you got there.” Delvio nodded, apparently astounded.

“It’s just what we needed!” Verrazano roared, enraged. “Delvs, we need to strike back at them, they killed my son!”

“It’s my nephew too, Ver. I want revenge as badly as you do, but we can’t lose our minds now.”

“That’s the same thing you’ve been telling me all these months. Now we have the proof we needed! I say we go and turn their Casino into dust!”

“Verrazano, please, listen to me. They WILL fight back, and we can’t afford a full-scale war. We’ve achieved much by being patient, and going berserk now would damage us much more than it would damage them.”

“I agree with Delvio.” I said calmly. “Whatever the reason for the assassination was, they did it because they were expecting a violent reaction from you. We need to think differently.”

“We?” Verrazano mumbled.

“Yes, we. You wouldn’t expect me bringing this information to you without expecting anything in return, would you?”

“Hm, all right.” Delvio nodded. “It’s reasonable. What do you want from us?”

“I have a request and a proposal.” I said coldly. “The request is simple: remove your actions from Freedom Field. My friends over at the other side of the wall have felt very upset by your goons.”

“We’ll consider it.” Delvio noted my demand on the papers. “What about the proposal?”

“I have a plan to cause some damage to Full House, but to make it happen, I will need some support from your forces.”

“What sort of plan?”

“I’ve located an entry point through the sewers to the lower levels of the Platinum Horseshoe. I intend to infiltrate the Casino and look for the main safe... and I plan to plunder it.”

“Have you done this before?”

“Yes, but outside of New Pegasus. That’s why it isn’t in your records... well, that, and because there were no

more survivors.”

“You sound convincing enough.” Delvio smiled. “Do you know where the safe is?”

“Sadly, I don’t.” I shook my head. “There are no blueprints of the inside of the Horseshoe.”

“So, you’ll have to improvise, right?”

“Up to a point, every plan implies improvisation.”

“Not bad, not bad.” Delvio chuckled. “You seem to have thought things out properly... what would you need from us?”

“My plan is the following: a first team, with me on the lead, will sneak into the Casino basement via the sewers, and will explore the area until the safe is located and the path is cleared. Then, a second team, with a safecracking expert, will also enter the facility and follow the secure route to the vault. Then, we’ll team up and return with Full House’s money.”

“Why the other safecracking expert?”

“In case something goes wrong.” I shrugged. “Having backup is always good if you’re venturing into unknown territory.”

“That sounds very reasonable.” Delvio nodded. “What do you think, Ver?”

“Give him what he wants, Delvs.” Verrazano had returned to his couch, visibly bored. “The sooner we can strike back at Full House, the better.”

“Heh, my brother can be very rough sometimes.” Delvio shrugged. “OK then, you’ll have your escort at midnight. I wish you luck and success.”

“Thanks.” I bowed, and turned around, followed by Rose.

As we left the room and regained our equipment, I couldn’t help the feeling that things had gone extremely smoothly, considering who I was dealing with. Verrazano had behaved in a way that fell within the expectable, being rough, violent and claiming for revenge as soon as I mentioned Full House’s fabricated implication. Delvio, on the other hoof, showed to be really dangerous and utterly unpredictable. He had run a background check on me, he had been constantly trying to find a weak spot in my reasoning, and most of all, he had shown his teeth, so to speak.

Something in the back of my head warned me against the younger Ferratura. He was smart and cunning, and the overwhelming presence and fame of his elder brother gave him enough cover to act inconspicuously. I had the feeling that his stance had switched suddenly in the middle of the conversation, and that could mean anything. Anyway, I had my eyes and ears open; so I would see him coming.

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“Before you say anything, Farsight, let me tell you that I don’t like this.” Rose looked extremely concerned.

“I know. Delvio is not to be trusted.” I nodded.

“Then why are you so calm?”

“Because I seriously doubt he’s going to betray me... now, at least. The Ferraturas may be many things: mobsters, butchers, scumbags, you name it. What they aren’t, though, is idiots. I am giving them the chance to wipe out a direct competitor and, at the same time, avenge the murder of their kin.”

“But our evidence was false!”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean they can’t profit from it. I assume the case won’t be going nowhere soon, so there will be no compromising revelations.”

“So what?”

“Put it this way: the case goes cold, and suddenly, the Ferraturas blame Full House of being responsible of Sandmound’s assassination. In consequence, they launch a preemptive attack against House and profit twice

from it.”

“Twice?”

“One, they would inflict a direct damage to the Horseshoe, either physical or economical. Two, they would pose as vindicators, claiming justice where the police failed to do it.”

“Don’t you think that would backfire at them?”

“I doubt it. No matter how civilized we pretend to be, this is still the Wasteland, and in the end, the population will follow strong leaders that leave no doubt of their determination. The Ferraturas will be sending a very clear message: don’t mess with us, or you’ll face the consequences.”

“Isn’t that the same policy that Verrazano is following?”

“Not at a hundred percent. Verrazano is going down the coercive road, while I am suggesting a fair warning. He attacks the freedom of other ponies, while I leave that freedom untouched. I am just being clear about the implications that the exercise of such liberties would have.”

“Making them responsible for your own actions... that’s wretched.”

“You don’t get to be a mob boss by being all nice and friendly.” I grinned. “Still, I have the feeling that the two brothers won’t be so understanding about the next steps of my plan; that’s why I’m expecting some stabs in my back.”

“What will you do about it?”

“For now, nothing. It’s early to drop the bomb on me. I’ll keep an eye open, just in case.”

“Farsight, you’re being too confident.”

“Listen, if that makes you feel better, don’t come with me to the Horseshoe. Stay on the lookout for any strange movements, follow your gut and try to uncover any plots against us. So far, you’ve proven to be very capable. I trust your instincts.”

“Fine...” Rose sighed. “If you’re so convinced about the success of your plan, I won’t hinder you. However, I don’t have any good feeling about the Ferraturas, especially about Delvio. Take care, alright?”

“I will.” I smiled and gave Rose a pat on the head. “Now let’s split up. I need to get in gear, and I would rather not have you around when the Ferratura goons arrive.”

Rose nodded and galloped away, blending in with the crowds as the distance grew between us. Her words of caution matched the ones in my mind: Delvio was dangerous, and had to be handled with extreme care. Verrazano was a loose bullet, but he lacked the subtlety needed to be a real problem. His brother, on the other hoof, was silent and kept his cards very well hidden from unwanted eyes.

I returned home and switched to my Wasteland gear. I wasn’t going to leave the relative safety of New Pegasus, but since we were going to storm a mob stronghold, it was reasonable to expect resistance. The nagging voice my head kept warning me as I tightened the latches of my leather armor and checked the status of my rifles. Why had Delvio changed his mind so quickly?

Ponies like him (or me) didn’t take a step forward without considering the consequences and implications. With that taken into account, it was hard for such ponies to change their minds, since their points of view were deeply grounded in thick layers of reasoning. The only time such a pony could undergo such a critical relocation of ideas was when confronted to something flawless and undeniable.

However, my plan was almost flawless and undeniable. The Ferratura Family had nothing to lose with such a sting, and claiming vengeance for the murder of a descendant was a reaction everypony in New Pegasus was expecting to happen. Delvio had to have understood the ups and downs of my proposal, and that must have been what had made him jump from his initial disregard to his final approval.

I walked back out of my apartment, ready to meet my escort in a side street close to the Horseshoe. I stood away from the Strip, as I had little doubt that a pony clad in full armour would at least turn some heads around. However, it seemed that my new mates hadn’t thought too much about discretion, as they were

calmly having a smoke in the middle of the main avenue.

“Well, what do you know...” I grumbled.

I disregarded my worries and advanced to meet the goons the Ferraturas had assigned me. They were all grizzled stallions, most of them of a certain age, armed to their teeth and showing more than one scar as if they were trophies. At least, I wouldn't have to worry about them not being combat-ready.

“Good night, folks.” I greeted. “Are you Delvio's lot?”

“Delvio's lot?” One of the mercs laughed. “You hear that, friends? Nopony had called us like that!”

“How should I have addressed you, then?” I asked, surprised at their reaction.

“Hey, hey, nevermind!” The merc kept laughing. “There was no bad intention. You must be Farsight, right?”

“Exactly. And you are?”

“Name's Uno.” The merc pointed at himself, then at his two companions. “These are my brothers Dos and Tres.”

“Uno, Dos and Tres, riiiiight.” I knew those names had to be fake. “You know why you're here, right?”

“We sure do.” Uno nodded.

“In that case, let's not lose any more time. Follow me.”

I trotted towards one of the ponyholes that led to the sewer tunnel we had to follow. With a little bit of magic, the cover lifted and moved aside, opening a big black hole through which we could descend. That action brought back memories of my departure from the Stable... I had been weak and full of fears; but it was something normal, once seen with perspective. For a moment, I wished that the Overmare and her pathetic clique of Dwellers could see me... but then again, what would it be good for, if I couldn't ask for retribution?

“Holy Celestia, I hate this place.” Dos mumbled.

“Don't we all?” Tres replied from behind.

“The smell is terrible...” I admitted. “However, we shouldn't be very far from the entrance.”

“You'd better be right.” Dos barked. “I am going to need a proper bath after this job.”

“And you'll have it, Dos, but shut up, for Luna's sake!” Uno exploded. “We are professionals, and this is not the worst we've been through.”

“I don't think we've crawled through many sewers, brother.”

“Who cares about that?” Tres mumbled. “We're getting paid.”

“Gentlecolts...” I said, stopping dead in front of a terminal. “Here we are.”

We found ourselves standing in front of a large blast door that, even if dimly lit by our flashlights and my PipBuck light, was completely different to the concrete walls of the sewer tunnel. Made out of what seemed to be reinforced steel, its hydraulic mechanism had been decorated with a large rendition of the Full House symbol, letting the bystander know in whose turf one was venturing.

“Not the most subtle of ways, isn't it?” Uno laughed.

“Nope.” I shook my head. “Now give me a second while I deal with the terminal.”

“It's all yours.”

I jacked my PipBuck to the small, green-lit computer hanging from the sewer wall; while the three mercenaries grouped and talked to each other in a tone low enough to not be heard by me. The security system of the blast door turned out to be quite difficult to crack, as there were several connections that could open the door while activating the alarm at the same time. Of course, I needed to avoid that, so I had to go through a series of loopholes and auxiliary protocols to stop any deterrence measure from going off.

It was a bit of a struggle, but in the end, I managed to find a way of deactivating the alarm associated to the door, and after that, getting the entrance open was piece of cake. I walked into the unknown, leading the pack of mercenaries through corridors of metal plating and neon lights. Everything in the lower levels of the Horseshoe had that very industrial and mechanic look, but the basement corridors lacked the minimal standards of comfort that had been considered in the casino halls.

“This place is like a giant metal coffin.” Uno whistled.

“Not the kind of place you’d expect in the middle of the Wasteland, right?” I remarked.

“Full House is a complete mystery.” The merc looked to the sides.

“Tell me about it.” I mumbled.

My main concern was to find the safe as quickly as possible. So far, we had moved undetected, but I had no guarantees of how long it would take us to come across a patrolling robo pony or a goon checking something out. Trying to keep my nerves under control, I looked over every corner, peeked in each room we passed and had an eye constantly on my E.F.S. while we trotted down the endless corridors.

One of the doors led to a series of catwalks above a large open hall, stuffed with crates and materials. At first, I thought we might have found the vault room, but when I looked down, my jaw dropped in awe. Beneath our hooves, a whole assembly line of robot ponies was working automatically, at full speed. Parts of steel and aluminum were assembled by metallic servo-arms, while other mechanic automatons fabricated the electronic circuitry that would govern the machines.

Full House had an army, and as long as he had a steady flow of materials (which were probably secured by the trade with the NER) he would be able to increase its numbers and withstand a large conflict. Suddenly, the idea of taking Full House out of the picture via a simple robbery seemed much less prone to happen. Even without money, he would be able to resort to military means to complete his objectives, so I thought I would have to warn the Ferraturas about their contender’s hidden ace. That would get them to trust me.

“Alright, bright buck. End of the line.” Uno’s voice came from behind, cold as ice.

I heard their guns cocking and the E.F.S. turned red in warning. With almost no time to think, I dove sideways towards a pile of wooden crates labeled as “parts”, right an instant before a hail of machine gun bullets rained upon the place I was standing on. At the same time, the alarms of the whole complex went off in a whining cacophony. I had been betrayed!

“What the fuck’s this, Uno?” I roared from behind cover, while unholstering my rifle.

**BLAM!** Missed shot, it went wide.

“It’s nothing personal, Farsight.” Uno had also gotten cover behind a plated railing. “Actually, you seem to be a fair pony; honest and trustable, but you know, we all have our allegiances.”

“You mean you’re obeying to higher orders?” I yelled.

“It’ll be our little secret.” Uno sent another bulletstorm, while Dos and Tres tried to flank me. “After all, you won’t live to tell the story.”

“Don’t bet on it.” I grunted, as I had seen Dos pop out behind a column. I breathed deep, took aim at his head and pulled the trigger.

**BLAM!**

Dos’s head burst open in a turmoil of blood, bone and brain matter, while his body was hurled backwards because of the impact of the bullet. One down, two to go. I saw Tres flinch for a second, but he quickly dove for cover and disappeared from my line of sight.

“That was my brother!” Uno roared, enraged.

“You wouldn’t expect me to let myself get killed, would you?”

“Fuck you!”

“Really, is that the best you can say?” I laughed.

Uno babbled something incomprehensible and tried to gun me down, while Tres tried the same flanking tactic his deceased brother had used. He was nimbler than Dos, so I had a harder time getting the aim ready. However, I managed to lock onto him.

**BLAM!**

Tres looped in the air and fell off the catwalk onto a pile of partially assembled robots. Uno wailed in rage once again and sent another series of bullets towards me. His aim was getting worryingly accurate, with some shots whistling away past me with almost no distance to my body.

“You’re good, I’ll give you that.” Uno groaned coldly. “But I fucking swear to Celestia that I will get you killed!”

“Hey, you tried to pull off the same trick twice.” I smiled cunningly. “Did you really expect to get it done the second time?”

“We’ll see who gets the last laugh!”

Uno leapt out of cover and galloped towards me, aware that I needed time to get my aim ready. He was too close for me to fire, so I had to improvise. I summoned a quick pressure spell on him and fired it as fast as possible, sending him to the floor with a sudden smack. The backlash of the spell gave me enough distance to ready my rifle and take aim, while gasping for air.

“Here’s your answer, Uno!” I roared.

**BLAM! BLAM!**

The two bullets of my rifle hit the mercenary leader in the head and in the chest, making him leap backward and fall dead, like a broken puppet. I sighed in relief after having sorted the problem out, but apart from the satisfaction I was having, a bubbling feeling of anger grew inside me. Full House had killed the only being I had felt an emotion similar to love, whereas the Ferratura Family had double-crossed me. I would have to find a way of...

**BZZZZZT!!**

I felt a sudden shock down my spine, and my legs weakened. My mind went numb and I couldn’t think properly as the electric current travelled through my body. Just before losing consciousness, I remembered that our fight had set off the alarms of the Casino basement. That had to be Full House’s welcome party, ready to deal with the intruders... or the intruder, properly speaking...

#

Note: Reputation Change

Full House Group: Suspicious. You have been caught snooping around in their domain, and they will have questions about their disappeared employee...

Ferratura Family: Shunned. Their reasons are unknown, but they have decided that you’re a nuisance for them. Take care.

## ***Chapter 16: Push It To The Limit***

*“Good evening to all of you faithful listeners out there, and welcome to New Pegasus Radio, the station with the best music west from Hooper Dam! I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, welcoming you to another entire hour of tunes and good vibes for all of you to enjoy! We have been listening to a rare jewel of our days, a faceoff between Dino Maretino and Swinging Voice, the two star crooners of the Clops and the Platinum Horseshoe, recorded live from the Grand Concert Hall of the Ferratura Casino!*

*You know, despite all the rivalry between the two facilities, rumour has it that the two artists are really good friends and that they share many moments together. At New Pegasus Radio we have heard many times that the two crooners, together with the zebra soloist Sunny Daybreak Junior, are willing to form a travelling band that will bring cheer to every end of the Neighvada Territory! We hope that this comes to fruition, folks, for every single music-loving pony will enjoy the gathering of these glorious singers in one meltdown of melody!*

*Let’s move to other less joyful matters, I’m afraid. Last night, unrest and chaos has broken loose in New Pegasus and Freedom Field. Around dusk, the Ferratura Family published an official statement in which they blamed Full House and his group of being behind the murder of Sandmound Ferratura, and decided to start a punitive action against the Platinum Horseshoe and the interests of its owner. At this very moment, the New Pegasus Strip has turned into a battlefield, in which House’s robot ponies and the Ferraturas’ hired guns are fighting for supremacy. From New Pegasus Radio we issue the following warning: stay in your homes, close the doors and windows and avoid getting close to the Strip.*

*In another fairly incomprehensible move, the Ferratura goons have attacked both the NPPD and the NER embassy, under the accusation of having conspired to crown Full House as the leader of New Pegasus, with the connivance of the Republic authorities. This will surely bring negative consequences to our city, as soon as the New Equestrian Republic deploys military forces back in Neighvada to deal with this uprising.*

*The situation doesn’t look much better in Freedom Field, either. Not so long ago, an internal conflict was threatening to break an all out war between the factions, but the work of unknown diplomats turned that potential turmoil into a peaceful and prospering community. However, the riots of last night have also spread to our neighboring township, as Ferratura forces have taken over the gate and have tried to storm the city and seize control of its governing facilities. We have no certain news of what is happening in there, but apparently the local gangs have organized a working resistance against the invader.*

*Outside the walls, things keep being pretty much the same as they were before the riots: the NER has moved away from Neighvada, leaving a small contingent behind to enact guard duty, but rumour has it that part of the Republican Army has turn around and begun its path back to New Pegasus, in order to enforce the law in town. From this little place I have in the waves, I would like to ask for common sense. Whatever these riots strive to obtain, it will be crushed as soon as the NER enters the walls and takes out the mob forces. Our unity makes us strong and independent. Please, let’s keep it that way.*

*Now that I have sent my plea, let’s return to the music for those of you who are at home, listening. We have heard some pretty new stuff, now let’s return to some classics, shall we? We all know Sweetie Belle had a prodigal career as a solo singer, but she did some collaborations as well! I bring you, probably, the best voice in the Old World; together with, probably again, the best string player in all of Old Equestria: Octavia! Enjoy the music, keep safe, and remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

My whole body was in pain, once again. It was nothing too heavy, just a feeling of pulsating discomfort echoing up and down in every muscle, but it was enough to keep me from having a relaxing sleep. I had no idea where I was at the moment, but considering that I felt a soft and fuzzy surface beneath my body instead of a cold and hard one, I guess I could give me the pleasure of relaxing for a little while... if it hadn’t been for that constant burden.

I remembered having fought three Ferratura mercenaries in the basement of the Platinum Horseshoe, a present of the two brothers who, obviously, wanted me out of the picture for a reason I still couldn't even fathom. I had managed to take the three out, but I hadn't been able to avoid the attack from Full House's security system, who had zapped me cold from behind. That being the case, I was surprised not to have been tied to a stake or chained to some torture mechanism.

I opened my eyes and let them get used to the level of brightness in the room. I had no idea how long I had been unconscious, but it had been long enough to make my weary eyes burn out the very moment I unrolled my eyelids. Once I was able to see, I found myself in a round chamber, with metal plated walls and a glass dome on the ceiling open towards the evening sky, covered as usual in clouds. I was starting to get an idea of where I had been taken to.

Overall, the decoration of the room was quite functional, although it didn't lack style or taste. Despite the cold metal walls, every now and then a painting or a photograph had been hung from it in order to break the monotony of grey tones that encircled the viewer. Most of the works exposed in the bedroom were quite modern and abstract, whereas the pictures showed common scenes of pre-War Las Pegasus, such as entire chariots of tourists unloading at the front gates of the Casinos, or renowned artists such as Octavia playing at a concert hall.

The rest of the furniture employed didn't overwhelm, for good or bad. A large bed presided the place, made of bright wood and a thick mattress. I couldn't deny the fact that it was comfortable, as I had been lying there for a good time, as far as I knew. A pair of wardrobes contained all kinds of masculine clothing, such as suits, trousers, shirts, ties and jackets, the entirety of them in a surprisingly good quality, taking into account that there were very few tailors working in New Pegasus.

I had grown convinced that I had to be at the top of the spire of the Platinum Horseshoe, considering that I was in a round compartment, with a clearly recognizable decorative style, with the added fact that it was a high floor, since I had an unhindered view of the sky. The reason of why I was there instead of lying on a dungeon was far beyond me. I couldn't understand Full House's motives, nor could I know what his plans were. Even if he was still responsible for Stuka's death, reason for which I couldn't just let him go unpunished, I found it surprising that he had spared my life, where the Ferratura brothers had tried to kill me.

I looked through the room for more clues on my captor's identity or personality, but there was nothing to be found. Everything seemed strangely impersonal, even fake, as if each element I came across had a reason to be there yet it failed to convey any sense of realism. Every suit was carefully conserved, hung and folded together in a level of care close to perfection, but they looked all too new to have been worn by anyone. Cufflinks, watches and tie pins shone in their cases, but it didn't seem as if they hadn't been used in the recent time. A large classic radio was standing on top of a bureau table, but it hadn't been tuned to the working stations, as it only spewed static when I turned it on.

"Who is Full House?" I mumbled, remembering the graffiti I had seen when leaving the Stable. The question seemed quite appropriate, from the looks of things.

I walked towards the room door, which opened with a hissing sound, leading me to a ring-shaped chamber that encircled the whole bedroom in a single entity. The glass ceiling I had seen before spanned onto that hall as well, curving down as it turned from roof to side wall, all in a piece of the same thick glass. I couldn't help whistling in admiration, and I had to admit that whoever had engineered such a place was a seriously bright pony.

For the first time, I noticed the silence that floated in the air. Such lack of any kind of noise was unnerving. In the Wasteland, total silence meant actual danger, and I had all my senses in full alert, even if I had my E.F.S. working and I was standing in a closed environment. One could never be careful enough, not after having survived an ambush just to have been captured the moment after.

I descended a small staircase and found myself in the middle of a small living room, a pair of couches and sofas distributed around a low-rise table, with a TV monitor in one end and a radio on the other, as well as a wooden bar with cupboards full of glasses and bottles. In other times, that would have been a magnificent spot to see the sunset or the sunrise, while having a cup of coffee or a cocktail, depending on the mood and

the time of the day. At that time, it looked alien, like a set for a holomovie.

I kept on walking along the ring-shaped chamber, leaving the lounge aside and crossing a dividing wall into a less glamorous part of the spire: what looked to be like a large control room, with an enormous screen that blocked all the glass windows and a multitude of keyboards and control panels spanning across the room. Also, there was a door that appeared to be an elevator out of the top of the spire. I appreciated the hospitality, but I had no will to stay, so I pressed the button.

“Going somewhere, Farsight?” A voice echoed in the hall.

“Who the FUCK is there?” I roared, partly angry and partly scared. I was quite nervous, with all the silence and the uncanny feeling that place gave me, and a sudden voice out of nowhere was not the best to calm me down.

“Behind you.”

“I hate it when ponies sneak up on... what in Celestia’s blazing socket?”

I turned around to see that the gigantic screen on the glass wall had lit up, showing the face of a middle-aged unicorn stallion with a gently cut mane, combed backwards and held together with a respectable quantity of gel. Since the screen was black and white (or more precisely, light green and black), I couldn’t tell which colours his fur or hair had, only that his coat was bright and his mane was dark. Also, he wore a pencil moustache over his muzzle, making him look dandy and... aged.

“I hadn’t heard that one before.” The voice spoke, even if the picture didn’t move. It wasn’t live feed, then. “I’ll have to note it down.”

“Who are you?” I asked the question, even if I was quite certain of the answer.

“Don’t you already know?” The voice showed some enjoyment. “I expected more from you, Farsight.”

“That means we’re going to play guess, then?” I shrugged. “Fine, Full House, have it your way.”

“Good, good.” Full House laughed subtly. “So you did know who I am.”

“I didn’t, but there weren’t many possible alternatives, given the place where I’m standing.”

“Tell me, what do you think of it?” House asked.

“It’s impressive, I’ll give you that.” I replied sincerely, as there was no danger on telling the truth for once. “Quite a work of engineering.”

“I know, right?” House’s voice became proud. “It cost me quite a lot of money, but the result is always the same: pure amazement.”

“Still, it would be more welcoming if you didn’t have everything so underused. It feels like I’ve been the only one here in a very long time.”

“Yes, it’s a pity that I haven’t been able to enjoy my own little haven.” House sighed in resignation. “Alas, the life of a businesspony is like a massive machine that needs to keep on moving not to break down, and these last months have required my attention in body and soul... Someday I will be able to disengage from my obligations as a manager and then I will make use of the facility I commissioned up there.”

“I sincerely hope you’re able.” I lied blatantly. “Just tell me, House, I don’t think you’ve brought me here to discuss your real estate, right?”

“Always jumping straight to conclusions, huh, Farsight?”

“We all have our busy lives, House. Mind if I call you House?” I grinned.

“Go ahead...” House sighed. “You know, that’s the problem with having a two-word name these days. Everypony addresses you with one of them, so I’m either Full or House, but never Full House. It gets to my nerves.”

“It’s quicker, though.” I shrugged. “And for a long conversation like the one I’m assuming we’re going to

have, I'd go for the easy option."

"Fine, fine." House's tone became a little dreary. "Young ponies these days... Anyway, lucky you, Farsight, since you won't suffer the same problem I face everyday."

"Don't get me wrong, House. I don't mean any sort of disrespect towards you. If you prefer, I shall address you by your full name."

"Never mind, Farsight." House huffed. "You've made your point, and I think I will be able to live with that... Now, where were we? Oh, yes!" House giggled and his voice became unctuous. "The reason why you're here at the moment."

"Pretty please." I frowned.

"You know, my blue friend, that you've caused quite an impression?"

"It's not the first time I'm told that very same phrase." I remembered Delvio's background check at the Clops. If Full House intended to pull that very same trick on me, he would have no luck.

"I'm very sure of that, Farsight. After all, you're not like the rest of the ponies."

"Really." I coughed. "What makes me so different?"

"Farsight, Farsight, Farsight." House's patronizing tone was quite irritating. I had to force myself to keep calm and let him do the talking. "I've got my fair share of years on my hooves, and I've seen a lot of ponies come and go. Las Pegasus has always been a magnet for ponykind, now and before."

I noticed that he used 'Las Pegasus' instead of 'New Pegasus'. Odd.

"Studying other ponies has been my job and my hobby." House continued. "I've read them like books, extracting any tiny bit of information from their stance, their way of acting, their way of speaking... My job as a Casino manager required me to know everything about my customers, both actual and potential, in order to adapt and offer them the best service in town. That is how I managed to climb to the top. In the meantime, I learned to like doing that, and I enjoyed every new encounter as a way to know more."

"That's praiseworthy." I yawned. "Sorry."

"And you know what?" House hadn't even paid attention at my impolite yawn. "I saw many differences, but there was a common trait shared by more than the 90 percent of the folks I met. They had their established lives and interacted with a very limited circle of ponies. Imagine the world as a large pond of clear and still water. Every pony I met was like a small pebble thrown to the pond. It would generate some small waves drifting away from it, but soon enough they would dissipate and disappear. You, on the other hoof, my friend, are a total anomaly; one of your kind."

"How am I supposed to read that?" I grunted, uncomfortable with the show Full House was giving me.

"You are no pebble thrown to the pond. You are a large rock that crashes onto the water and creates a colossal tidal wave. You change governments, take some leaders down and crown others, and conspire to take your place in the scheme of things; while keeping in the safety of the shadows. History hasn't seen many like you around, but when one appears, the face of the world changes forever."

"Thanks for the compliment, House." I smiled ironically. "I had never been called an anomaly before."

"I meant no offence, if that is what worries you." House's voice tried to show kindness.

"There are more worrisome things than your possible verbal offences, House." My voice sounded cold and cutting. "For example, the attack you launched on Freedom Field."

"The attack? Oh, you mean that." House grunted. "I didn't like that mare at all, coming here so cockily, demanding me to aid her in her quest to recover what was rightfully hers."

"Then why did you help her?"

"Me, helping her?" House laughed, leaving me totally confused. "No, Farsight, you got that wrong. I would have never helped her."

“Then how come your goons were the ones conducting the assault?”

“Farsight, you should have already noticed that I don’t rely on goons to do that kind of job. I have my trusted roboponies for that.” House sighed. “When miss Swallow tried to crowbar some help out of me, I sent Rocky Shade to fetch a bunch of lousy hired guns from the gutter; I gave them guns and bardings and sent them to be killed. I was expecting you to find them and stop them before anything happened, and so you did.”

“There was one casualty, you know.” I grunted, my teeth clenched in anger at House’s attitude.

“Oh, yes. Stuka Talonblade, former Talon member and bodyguard of Saddle Buckmare. A worthy individual, it was a real shame that she had to die like that.” House’s voice showed true remorse. “Trust me, I regret not having shot Golden Swallow in the face the very moment she came to me.”

“You won’t expect me to believe those words, will you?” I grunted.

“Of course not. That doesn’t keep them from being the truth, though. What you do with my word is a completely different matter.” House’s voice sounded stern and even sincere. Could he actually be telling what really happened?

“Actually...” I steered those thoughts away. “There is something more in which you have made my life difficult.”

“I guess it involves your banishment and your citizenship.”

“You guess right.”

“Once again, I find myself in need to ask for forgiveness.” House sounded to be ashamed. “I should never have let you be exiled to Freedom Field, had I known what you would become in such a short period of time.”

“How obliging of you.” I grinned sarcastically. “One could have said that you even like me.”

“You mention it as if it were something outrageous.”

“It is outrageous.” I growled. “You have been a constant nuisance in my life, forcing me to take the hard way towards my goals, and yet you tell me that you have grown fond of me? Don’t make me laugh.”

“I did have the feeling that you would react like this. However, I have admitted my past mistakes towards you, and I believe you should show me a bit of mercy, in all fairness.”

“Fine.” I grumbled. “Let me hear what you have to say. I would be as stubborn as some bucks I’ve met in the world if I didn’t give you a chance. I will have to leave my feelings aside for a moment, but I warn you: don’t expect much from me, apart from what I’m already showing you.”

“A bit of patience is the only thing I ask for.” House’s voice became obliging and mellifluous once again.

“You might not have noticed it, but I have been watching you for a long time now, Farsight.”

“What, are you going to do the same thing Delvio did yesterday?” I showed my teeth with malice. “That’s an old trick already, House.”

“Ah, yes, Delvio Ferratura. A brilliant mind, but devoted to a lost cause. His nephew could have changed the status quo, but with him dead and with Verrazano in charge, they are destined to be history in a matter of time. Too bad, I really liked the young buck.”

“What do you mean by saying that you really liked the young buck? You mean Sandmound?”

“Of course I mean Sandmound. I invited him twice to chat with me in the very place you are today, Farsight. Naturally, I did it without his family’s consent or knowledge, but he agreed gladly to join me for a cup of tea. We discussed many matters: politics, economy in the Wasteland, possible trades with the NER, sending aid to the caravaneers... Overall, he was a very polite and well educated colt, and he could have driven the Ferratura Family to a level of prosperity never known to that point. It was a real disgrace what happened to him.”

“Do you mean you didn’t have him killed?” I asked, baffled. That was a turn of events that I had never

expected. I had considered the possibility of Full House not being the culprit, but I guess that my intent to profit from the case had clouded my sense of judgment. It had been a mistake from my side.

“Me?” House laughed. “I would never have done such an atrocity. Not because I have any regrets about having ponies killed, that is part of the routine; but Sandmound was valuable. He was... a chosen one, in some sorts. His fate was to elevate New Pegasus to a new age of glory, but that destiny was cut short by somepony else. What brings you to think that?”

“N-nothing.” I grumbled, feeling out of place.

“I see. That’s why you were here, right? You tried to convince the Ferratura Brothers to send a scouting patrol against me, and they betrayed you as soon as you set foot in the Horseshoe.”

“More or less.”

“Well, at least you didn’t get pummeled by them. I have to give you praise for your ability with the rifle.”

“You didn’t have to zap me to bring me here, though.”

“Ugh.” House grunted, and I swear I could picture a facehoof associated. “You know what, that’s the problem with roboponies. They lack subtlety. They can’t think for themselves, which would have been good in this case, because I doubt that you would have offered any kind of resistance.”

“I would have had little choice.” I shrugged.

“You see, roboponies are programmed to do simple tasks. ‘Disarm intruder’ can be done in many ways, depending on the circumstances. I would have suggested an invitation to join me, at gunpoint of course. However, their circuitry always assumes the intruder is hostile and zaps him.”

“I hardly believe that’s the limit when it comes to robotic intelligence.”

“Believe me, I know my share of experiments that have gone wrong. The current boundary is set by the circuitry; more complex operations would need more complex systems, and we can’t either develop or produce them. There have been trials of attaching pony brains to electronic platforms, but there has been little luck. The death toll of the brains is huge, and among those who survive, many suffer damage from the organic-inorganic interface. In a nutshell, we won’t be going nowhere anytime soon.”

“Lovely lecture. Still, I don’t see why you would bring me here.”

“Farsight, Farsight, Farsight.” Again that patronizing tone. “I have been watching you for a long time now. I let you go once, when you came offering yourself as a cheap employee for my Casino, still dressed in your Stable 188 jumpsuit. Tell me, do you feel homesick? At night, do you remember the coziness of your bed in your little, secure and perfect world?”

“My life down there was far from perfect, House.” I winced. “I was a loner and a freak for the rest of the Dwellers. It’s true that my exile was a very traumatic moment, but in the end, I think my life has become... better.”

“Yes, it’s fairly common that outcasts say that... Brass Badge, Tracker, as well as many others. It’s funny how Stables were built to preserve life and welfare, and how in the end they destroy their inhabitants, physically or psychologically.”

“I hardly consider myself psychologically destroyed, thank you very much.”

“Because you aren’t, Farsight. You are strong, and you have proven that. The death toll in Freedom Field is very high, especially for newcomers; even for those who come from the Wasteland. Muggers, bandits, bar fights... you name it, but chances are that you might end lying on a pool of your own blood while some dickwad is wasting your money in whores and booze. Yet, you survived. You quickly grasped where to go, where not to put your nose in; who to trust and who to shun. You became dextrous with guns and strong in your magic, and you set off for adventure in the Wasteland.”

“Isn’t that what everypony does?” I disregarded his speech.

“In the end, yes.” House laughed. “But it usually takes them a lot longer than what it took you.”

“The only thing you can extract from my trajectory is that I am a quick learner.”

“Are you? The world is full of ponies who want to travel the Wastes but can’t move away from the comfort and routine of a city, like Freedom Field. The Wasteland is not a place for weaklings, it eats them alive. An abandoned Stable is not a welcoming place, even for the weathered travelers.”

“How do you know I got into a lost Stable?”

“I have knowledge of all things that happen in New Pegasus, and of most of those that do in Freedom Field. Besides, Water Talismans don’t appear by magic, one must search them in the place they were implanted.”

“OK, fair enough. It’s logical that somepony found out about it.”

“It is indeed. You should know that I’ve got eyes and ears almost everywhere, and that I caress such information. How else could I have known that you were already working for Dee Cleff when you first left for the Wasteland?”

“I think I will stop acting surprised for every fact of my life you reveal.” I shrugged. “Just to economize my energies, you know.”

“Do as you wish, Farsight. It won’t change the fact that you’ve thrived with every step you’ve taken out there. The NER could have been a bite too big to swallow, but apparently you managed to impress them as well. I wonder what you offered them, but I think I can guess... you opened the gates of Freedom Field for them, did you?”

“Not really. I just was the middle-pony in the negotiations. I only had to piss Goldie enough to destabilize her alliance with Saddle Buckmare, and from there things went smoothly until the bitter end.”

“Bitter?” House whispered. “Why bitter? You got what you wanted, didn’t you?”

“Yes. But at an unbearable cost.”

“Stuka, of course. Once again, my condolences. I was quite surprised that you two developed such a relationship together, but I will have to admit that miss Talonblade wasn’t your usual griffin mercenary. I know that no words of mine will replace her loss, but please, take my apologies for what they are, sincere and deep.”

“I will, but out of politeness. I don’t trust you enough to accept your excuses just like that.”

“However, didn’t you enact your vengeance over Goldie, as you call her? Didn’t you cast all your rage upon her, giving you a certain closure and satisfaction?”

“Justice was made.” I grunted.

“No. You took revenge. That’s how it goes, Farsight. You can’t be the judge and part of the accusation; but I won’t get into an argument about such technicalities. I want you to look at yourself and to compare what you see with what you were when you surfaced in New Pegasus. You are a fully different pony, weathered by the worst of the Wasteland but keeping one of the brightest minds in perfect use. You are a well-oiled political machine that can restructure all the levels of power in this world. You are the anomaly.”

“Yes, so what?” I was starting to like House’s way of speaking. It had something charismatic, something of utter attraction that made me feel good. “Where do you go from here?”

“I’ve been trying to contact you ever since you crossed the gates. However, you always do a fine job avoiding my roboponies, and I didn’t want any unwanted eyes or ears snooping on our meeting.”

“You should already know what I think about your metal minions, House.”

“Yes, and I don’t blame you.” House sighed. “After what you’ve been through, it’s logical that you’ve grown a certain level of caution against them. Still, as I told you, I pursued you up and down the Strip, but you always managed to go one step ahead... until you came right into my lair. In the end, you have made things easy for me, Farsight. Very easy.”

“Remind me to punish myself for it.”

“Why should you?” House laughed. “It has given me the chance of getting to know you.”

“And that sudden interest in me?”

“I told you, you are a unique element in New Pegasus, and probably in the Wasteland. Your abilities have been thoroughly proven, and there is no doubt that you hold enough potential inside you to become somepony great. You just need proper guidance.”

“Are you offering to be my mentor?” I grinned. Such a proposal had never gone through my mind.

“It’s not a matter of mentoring you.” House’s tone switched to a certain nostalgia. “I told you that I’ve taken pride in my ability to read ponies like books, in catching every bit of information they displayed in their words and actions. That ability made me what I am today, that skill built this place and gave me my wealth and power. You, on the other hoof, have shown another ability that goes beyond mine: you can read ponies, and you can... rewrite them, so to speak. Make them think what you want them to think, railroad them towards a situation you have engineered before. I want you to join me, Farsight, and together, we shall bring prosperity and glory to New Pegasus, and beyond!”

“Wasn’t that supposed to be Sandmound’s doing?” I asked, remembering his speech.

“Yes, it was; but the strings of fate took him away. However, that very fate brought you into play, and I honestly think that you are far better suited for the job than the deceased Ferratura heir.”

“I lack his family ties, though.”

“But you excel in diplomacy and politics, my young friend!” House sounded as if he was prancing. “There is nothing you won’t be able to do. Think about it, Farsight. You have been worried for your survival and your well-being ever since you were cast out. It’s logical to do that, and it’s what all of us work to do every single day. I am offering you the chance of your lifetime, the opportunity to forget about surviving and to set your mind onto higher goals.”

“Do you?” I liked what I heard. “What do you want in return, House?”

“I want you to help me take over the Ferratura Family. I want you to lead my armies against those who oppose me, no matter whether it’s the Don, the NER or Celestia herself who wants to stop our glorious crusade.”

“I guess that’s something... that I should carefully consider.” I smiled. “Losing my freedom is not something to be taken lightly.”

“Who says you would lose your freedom?” House laughed kindly. “I’m not asking for your serfdom, Farsight; I’m proposing an alliance. The two of us, together and freely, pushing towards domination.”

I took a deep breath to think. House’s proposal was juicy and apparently harmless. Having a chance to forget about our daily worries and living a life of bigwigs was what I had been fighting for, and I had it in my hoof’s reach. I just had to agree and it would all be done. Suddenly, a large explosion rocked the building and the lights went off for a second, as well as the screen. The buzz of static coming from my PipBuck filled the room... apparently, the tremor had activated my radio.

“...Farsight! Farsight! Can you hear me?” It was Rose’s voice!

“What? Rose?”

“Farsight, thank Celestia! Where are you?”

“I’m on the top floor of the Horseshoe Spire.”

“What happened to you?” Rose’s voice was almost covered by the sound of bullets.

“Long story! Was that a bullet?” I screamed.

“Yes, we’re held up at the NPPD, and things are getting ugly! House’s roboponies have started firing at random folks, and they’re trying to overrun us!”

“WHAT?”

“Yes, the Ferratura goons started attacking, but now they’ve been forced into some fortified spots down the Strip, apart from the Clops. Also, I think that both parties have taken the battle down to Freedom Field. What are you doing up there?”

“I’m being kept prisoner here by Full House. He’s being very... seductive.”

“Believe none of his words!” Rose yelled. “Whatever he’s up to, he’s not to be trusted! Be very careful, Far...”

The radio turned off as suddenly as it went on, but Rose’s words echoed in my head. Indeed, I had let myself be dazzled by House’s proposals, but while he was trying to convince me he had launched his robots to enforce his will over New Pegasus. So much politics needed for that.

“Sorry for that little inconvenience.” House was back on the screen. “The radio inhibitor system took a bit of a beating with that blast. Where were we?”

“Discussing your proposal, House. I told you I found it interesting, but I needed a bit of time to think about it.”

“And? Have you reached a decision?” House sounded eager.

“Before we get to that, House... what happened with the politics and the diplomacy?”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“House, if you needed me so badly to help you bring peace and prosperity to New Pegasus, why did you send your robots to trample over everypony?”

“My robots?” House tried to fake a tone of surprise. “They will be responding to the attack launched by the Ferraturas, I suppose.”

“The Ferraturas don’t hide in the NPPD building, and I’ve heard a report of an assault from your bots against the station. I don’t know what you are machinating, House, but don’t count me in.”

“I see.” House’s tone grew cold and menacing. “You do understand that the city is on the verge of chaos, with the Don’s ponies attacking both us and the NER. You are aware of what this will bring upon the city if we don’t act properly and soon.”

“Yes, I am fully aware of that, but I doubt that your decision has been the correct one to deal with that problem. I don’t like where I fit in your scheme of things, so I am afraid to tell you that I will have to decline your offer.”

“Farsight, think about what you are doing. You are making a big mistake by crossing me... something I will make you regret the rest of your life. At this very moment, many of your beloved ones are in danger, and I am the only one that can save them from such danger.”

The screen flickered and several pictures of Rose, Dee, Nadyr or even Ampera appeared in it, surrounding House’s static image, which hadn’t changed in our entire conversation.

“I will make this simple for you, Farsight. Join me and they will live, and I promise that nothing or no pony will harm them. Leave, and I shall destroy them without mercy. I have guns pointing at every single one of them, and I only need to issue the order. It’s your responsibility, Farsight. Choose wisely.”

Any other pony would have backed up and joined him. Any other pony would have felt fear and danger, and would have given up his free will to save those he loved. Any other pony would have believed Full House’s words as if Celestia herself had revealed them to him only. However, I was no any other pony, and I had spoken enough to Full House to notice that he was bluffing. He had nothing, and he was pulling off a desperate measure to keep me on a leash.

“Good bye, House.” I bowed. “You lost your chance.”

I turned around and pushed the elevator button, causing the machinery to start moving.

“Mark my words, Farsight. You will rue the day you chose to turn my offer down.”

“Don’t put all your caps into it, House, or you might get broke.”

The elevator door opened and I walked inside, calmly. No pony was going to threaten me from the other side of a screen.

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The elevator hummed dimly as it plummeted down the spire axis. As soon as the doors closed, I had activated the PipBuck radio, trying to contact Rose once again, but there was nothing more in the waves than static. Her call had been a really lucky coincidence, for I had been really close to selling my soul to Full House, who was a bit of a devil.

It would have been a betrayal to all what I had done until then, but he had bewitched me so much that I had been unable to see it clearly. After all, I had moved driven by survival first, and by dignity second. When I got into New Pegasus, my ambition rocketed and I saw myself daydreaming about the possibility of ruling over a casino and being worshipped as a wise and valuable ruler. Besides, that would let me put all my wealth in motion, since I couldn’t use my gold without fear of being noticed and robbed.

However, giving in to House’s demands would have been a mistake and a letdown to all the ponies that had ever believed in me. It would have meant a disrespect to Stuka’s memory and a failure to Rose, Nadyr or even Dee. I had taken my decisions freely, without any restraint, and with full responsibility. No matter what House had promised me, he wouldn’t pay his dues. After all, I had seen what he was up to.

He had an army in the making, and he was preparing to use it. The attack the Ferraturas had launched was the perfect excuse to let his robots loose and take over the city, turning him into the de facto king of Neighvada, since the NER army was either at the other side of the Divide or beyond Hooper Dam, and House would be able to entrench himself and use the population as a shield.

I had my rifle ready, hovering close to me, since I expected a rough welcome once the elevator hit the ground floor. I had no doubt that House would have issued an order against me, and that all the robots I came across would fix me as a priority target. In the meantime, I kept fiddling with the PipBuck radio knob, trying to find a voice among the static.

“Wheee...bzzz...whoooo...beeeep!” The radio emitted incoherent sounds until suddenly, the static broke. “Hello? Farsight? Anypony?” Rose’s voice spoke through the transponder.

“Rose? Can you hear me?” I yelled.

“Farsight! What happened? I found you and lost you so quickly...”

“Full House had a radio inhibitor system installed in the top of the spire. A sudden explosion outside disabled it for a minute.”

“Where are you now?”

“In the elevator of the Horseshoe Tower, heading down to the ground floor. What about you?”

“We’re pinned down in the NPPD, but we are fine.” Rose tried to be calm, although she was naturally stressed. “There are plenty of guns and ammo here to resist.”

“Who are you with? You spoke about ‘we’.”

“I’m here with Nadyr and Snake Eater. Dee and the rest of the gangs have entrenched themselves in Freedom Field, but she insisted in sending them both to help us in here.”

“Yes!” I pranced. House had nothing to hurt me with, since Rose, Nadyr and all the rest of the ponies I could care about were fine and giving House hell. “By the way, where is Brass Badge?”

“He and Standoff headed to the Library to establish a defense system. I think he might be worried about Tracker.”

“Good old Brass Badge and his Stable loyalty.” I smiled. “How are things over there?”

“We can handle for a while.” Rose spoke with a firm and secure tone. “Still, we need to know what to do

next... this is a battlefield, and we can't stay here forever.”

“Give me some time to get back to you, then we'll discuss our next move. Although I have an idea in my mind that I think you will like.”

“All right then. See you soon!” Rose turned the communication off and static buzzed once again. I deactivated my radio and prepared for a fight, as the elevator was reaching its stop.

“Casino floor.” A metallic voice announced my arrival, and the doors opened.

I checked my E.F.S. to anticipate the attacks, but there were little hostile dots showing, and most of them were almost at the end of the detection range. The rest of the elements were marked as friendly, so I was able to relax a bit. The casino floor was full of ponies, most of them gamblers or regular citizens that had been surprised by the outbreak of violence in the streets. Most of them looked worried or anxious, watching the battle outside with evident fear in their faces.

“I don't understand it...” one pony said.

“Who could have started this?” another asked.

“Don't you see it?” a third pony bragged. “It's House who's behind this! Look, his roboponies are firing at the population!”

“That's nonsense!” a fourth one replied. “I saw Ferratura grunts firing before!”

“Who cares? They're destroying the city!”

“Somepony must stop this!”

“Go ask House!”

“No, go to the Ferratura brothers!”

“You go, I'm not risking my coat for that!”

“Me neither!”

The constant bickering in the gambling halls let me slip by almost unnoticed, as the ponies were too worried about who was to blame to pay attention to the blue armored stallion that had exited the elevator and was sneaking towards a side exit. Once on the streets, though, it would be another situation.

I had an eye on my Eyes-Forward Sparkle and another down the sights of my gun as I galloped down the side streets of New Pegasus. I had decided to take a detour in order to avoid getting caught in the middle of the fray, even if it would take me longer to reach my destination. To be honest, I was in a hurry, but I would be of little help if I took a bullet to the knee.

As the minutes passed, I grew more and more worried about Rose and Nadyr. They were pinned down in the police station, and despite all the words my filly companion had told me to keep me from freaking out, I knew for certain that they were in trouble. I had to help them as fast as possible, or I would never...

**PEW-PEW-PEW!**

I felt something burning in my hindleg, as if a red hot iron had been pushed for an instant against my coat and then quickly removed. The sudden pain made me lose coordination and I stumbled headfirst into the concrete floor, then quickly jumped back onto my hooves in a mixture of rage and embarrassment.

“What on Equestria?” I groaned in pain and looked at my flank. Something had burnt my coat and my flesh, leaving a pretty ugly mark. “What hit me?”

“Throw - down - your - gun - or - you - will - be - destroyed.” A toneless voice spoke from behind a corner, and a robot pony rolled into the alley.

“Fuck, that must have been a laser bolt. Those things are dangerous.” I whistled in pain. “Now, about who's destroying who...”

**BLAM-BLAM-BLAM!!**

I fired three shots in a row, aimed at the screen where the pony face was displayed. From a logical point of view, there was no reason to think that a robot would have its 'vital' parts in the 'head', but I simply couldn't stand looking at a fake face that had shot me from the back. The screen exploded in a rainstorm of sparks and the robopony stumbled, lost balance and fell to the side. I also noticed how one of the bullets went wide and hit the target on a metal-plated area, making almost no harm to the mechanic freak.

"No doubt they're winning the battle..." I hissed. "These things are heavily armored!"

I searched the bot and found the laser beam cannon-thingy with which it had tried to burn me to a crisp, then began fiddling with it. With a little bit of skill I would be able to detach it and use it myself... hardly any plating would withstand a burst of laser fire. After a bit of tinkering, I had the gun and the energy capacitor system already out of the robot's hull, and I only needed to wire it so that it would work as an independent system.

"That's it..." I grinned malevolently. "That will teach those shiny asses who to fear."

The nozzle of the gun had lit up with a dreary pink fluorescence, warning of its power and inherent danger to anypony brave or dumb enough to stand on its way. I was no handipony, but I knew my electronics good enough to be able to close a circuit... maintenance had always been lousy at the Stable, so one had to know how to perform some basic repairs.

Once properly armed, it was only a matter of melting robots (and some flesh-and-bone ponies as well) until I reached the NPPD building. It wasn't suffering a major siege, but I had to clear out the entrance before I was able to get into the lobby. The main corridors and rooms had been turned into trenches by means of toppled tables, shelves or crates, but most of them had been holed through with efficiently fired laser beams.

Everything was too quiet, and I had a bad feeling in my gut. The pain in the leg wasn't helping either, so I did something that I should never have done, according to the common logic of the Wasteland: I gave away my position.

"Rose! Nadyr!" I yelled. "Where are you? Are you alright?"

"Intruder!" A robotic voice echoed, and one of House's soldiers popped out of a side room.

"Dangit." I mumbled, and fired my laser gun, melting the chest plating of the droid and fusing all its internal circuitry. "Bad call. Rose!! Can you hear me?"

"Yes, we're fine!" Rose screamed from somewhere in the building. "But there might be more bots inside, be careful!"

"I took one out, and my E.F.S. doesn't pick up anything within range!" I replied. "Come to the lobby, I'll wait for you here!"

I heard the sound of hooves against the floor, and a minute later, Rose and Nadyr came out of one of the interrogation rooms, followed closely by Snake Eater, who looked less like a friendly old buck and more like a grizzled war veteran, with a saddlebag-mounted heavy machine gun threatening to rain hell upon its enemies.

"Farsight!" Rose gave me a tight hug. "You're fine! Thank the Goddesses!"

"Well, I'm fine... more or less."

"What? Why?" Rose noticed my burn. "Ugh, laser fire. Don't worry, I'll have you patched up."

Rose's magic began working its miracle on my burnt leg, while Nadyr gave me a pat in the back while smiling cunningly.

"What's up, bro? We thought we had lost you."

"I can be annoyingly persistent, Nadyr. You know that more than anypony."

"Hell yeah, I do." Nadyr laughed. "I'm not going to ask you where you've been, since I know you've tried to play cards with Full House and the Ferraturas. Guess things didn't go so well after all."

“They play with marked cards, Nadyr.” I shrugged. “Always a lesson learnt. How about you?”

“I have only one word. Twins.”

“Twins?” I mumbled, suddenly catching what he meant. “Congratulations, my friend! How did you find out?”

“We went to Mixer’s for a global check, and that’s what he told us. Twins!”

“Good for you two then! Let’s not get you killed, alright? Those two will need a father.”

“That’s what ah told yer.” Snake Eater said.

“Hey Snake.” I smiled. “Watch where you point that, will you?”

“Ya mean this?” Snake laughed. “Dun’ worry, Farsight. Ah got it under control.”

“I hope you do.” I whistled.

“Done!” Rose cheered. “So, what is your plan, Farsight?”

“To put it simply, I want to get back into the depths of the Platinum Horseshoe and find out where Full House really is.”

“Didn’t you meet him on the top of the Spire?” Rose asked.

“He spoke with me via a communication device. I only heard his voice and saw a picture of his face displayed on a screen. We did speak, yes, but I can’t say I really met him.”

“Do you suspect something?”

“Not really, apart from the fact that he has an entire robot factory inside the Casino basement. With that in mind, it’s logical that he’s about to win this war.”

“So you think he might be down there?” Nadyr said.

“Ah would hide close to mah precious possessions.” Snake sentenced. “If House likes ‘is robots as much as ah think’e does, ‘e’ll be there.”

“Then that’s where we should go.” Rose nodded. “I am worried about the bots, though. They are very resilient.”

“Fetch their laser guns, in case you haven’t blown them to bits. I have found them to be exceptionally effective against mechanized enemies.”

“You heard the boss!” Nadyr laughed. “Let’s get scavenging!”

Twenty minutes and some rewirings later, we were back on the streets and heading for the Platinum Horseshoe. We avoided the Strip once again, for the battle kept raging and the Ferraturas had launched a counterattack in three crossings, forcing House’s robots to regroup and defend their positions.

“Sum’ponies know their strategy.” Snake Eater nodded in admiration. “Ah wouldn’t’ave bet a single cap fer th’Ferraturas, but look at’em now. They’re good’uns.”

“I agree.” I admitted. “Despite their weaker weaponry, they are being able to outwit the enemy. Let’s not lose any minute, though, or they might get into the Horseshoe before us.”

“Watch out, robot, three o’clock!” Nadyr roared.

**PEW-PEW-PEW!**

“Not anymore.” Lavender’s voice spoke through Rose.

“Thanks, Lav.” I galloped forward.

“Lav?” The filly looked at me with a funny face; funny as in utterly pissed.

“Fine, Lavender.” I groaned.

“That’s better.”

We moved quickly through the alleys of New Pegasus, showing no mercy to any opposition, no matter if robot or Ferratura goon, that would stand in our way. Some minutes later, we were descending to the sewers through the ponyhole I had used one day earlier to guide the mercenary pack.

“Damn, and I thought Neighorleans smelled bad.” Nadyr whistled.

“I have a certain feeling of *déjà vu*.” I groaned. “I know it smells like... well, like a sewer, incidentally, because that’s what it is!”

“Easy now, Farsight.” Nadyr grinned. “I meant no offence. It’s just that it smells... reeeally bad.”

I disregarded the half-zebra’s comment and trotted down the tunnel, following the marker I had left on my PipBuck when I first planned the infiltration. I hadn’t even remembered erasing it when I got out of House’s trap, and now it was helpful once again. Soon enough, we were in front of the blast door, whose security protocols hadn’t been updated. I had no trouble hacking into the system and operating the controls, and a minute later, we were inside the complex basement.

“Ah, so the prodigal son returns.” House’s unctuous voice echoed through the metal corridors.

“Who’s that?” Rose asked, startled.

“That’s Full House... his voice, at least.” I answered, discontent. “He must be watching us.”

“But of course I’m watching you.” House replied. “And I can hear you too. You won’t think that after breaking into my casino once I would leave all security down twice, would you?”

“I may have a terrible opinion of you, House, but I know you’re no fool.” I looked to the ceiling in search of possible cameras. “I was expecting such a welcome from you.”

“Good, I knew that you were smart.”

“Thank you, House. You know how to treat a pony well.”

“Oh, I see you’ve brought company!” House’s voice became more unbearable. “Are these ones going to shoot you from the back as well?”

“They shouldn’t.” I shrugged. “But who knows, right?”

“Once bitten, twice shy, isn’t it, Farsight?” House laughed. “We all learn from our mistakes, and my mistake was letting you go. That won’t happen again.”

Suddenly, as House was saying that, two turrets appeared from the ceiling and aimed at us. I hadn’t seen them in my E.F.S., and that was quite worrisome. However, there were more pressing matters at hoof.

“Take cover!” Snake Eater yelled and fired a round of laser against the left turret.

We backpedaled to hide behind columns, while bolts of pink laser fire crossed the room, threatening to tear a burnt hole in our bodies. House’s maniacal laughter echoed through the corridors, making me extremely nervous. That pony had the innate ability to destabilize me.

“You seem very confident, House!” I called out, as I took a shot at the turret. “Don’t underestimate us!”

“I don’t think I am going to fall for that, my friend. I know what you are capable of... and about your companions’ abilities as well!”

“How does he...?” Rose whispered.

“He’s bluffing.” I replied in a very low volume. “He does that all the time.”

“Are you sure?”

“Trust me.”

Rose nodded and aimed carefully. A burst later, the left turret was gone in a flash and a bang. I smiled at the filly and took aim for the right turret. An instant later, we were free to go.

“You have mustered quite a notorious team, Farsight.” House whistled. “I wasn’t sidetracked when I regarded you as a leader.”

“Keep your fake praises to yourself, House.”

“Fake? How dare you say that, my good sir!” House overreacted. “All my words of recognition towards you are genuine. I feel offended by that.”

“Oh, boo-hoo-hoo.” Lavender whined, as we galloped forward, into the catwalk room where the Ferratura mercs had ambushed me. “You feel offended. What a big deal, mister Full House.”

“So it’s true. The little rose has a thorn hidden.” House mocked. “You must be the infamous Lavender.”

“Gee, you flatter me, House. ‘The Infamous Lavender’. It sounds good, it has class, presence, pizzazz.” Lavender laughed. “You do know how to treat a mare.”

“Why yes, but does your ‘employer’ know? Or is he something more?”

“Like what, like my lover?” Lavender let go a burst of laughter. “Seriously, House? Do you think I’d really let myself be shagged by Farsight?”

“You did tempt Rocky Shade.”

“Ah, Rocky. Poor little sod, he never saw it coming.” Lavender sighed funnily.

“Indeed, he was a fool, and therefore disposable.” House disregarded his death with a quick huff. “However, what if he hadn’t given in so quickly... would you have let him give you your first time? You know, when I hired Rocky he had a long backstory as a raider... and he took pride in the number of mares he had raped. I’m pretty sure that he would have taught you some of his tricks.”

“I don’t think so, House.” Lavender sounded uncomfortable.

“Ask yourself the following question. What would Farsight have done if Rocky had tried to negotiate with him?”

“What do you mean, House?” I grunted.

“What if Rocky had offered to lead you to me in exchange of a go with Rose? What would you have done?”

I saw House’s intent. He was trying to confront me with Lavender by means of posing a diabolic question. It was nothing more than a hypothetical situation, but if I didn’t respond in a way that left no trace of doubt I might be faced with the rage of a psychotic killing machine. It was all a matter of trust, and I had to be totally clear with Lavender or she’d never trust me again.

“Good question. What would you have done, Farsight?”

“If that had been the case we would have been forced to find another source of information, Lavender. I don’t sell my friends, period.” My voice was stern and firm when I issued my reply. There could be no trace of insecurity.

“Are you sure about that?” House crooned.

“Completely sure.” I sentenced. “Besides, that’s just a hypothesis that never came to happen. What you’re trying to do is totally inelegant and not what I had expected from a gentlecolt like you.”

“All is allowed in love and war, my little Farsight.” House giggled. “You should know that more than any, so don’t go pulling out the elegance card with me. Such matters are valid in a ballroom but not in a battle.”

“How narrow-minded of you, House.” I murmured.

“You are a wise being, Lavender. You should see what a disgraceful element you’ve teamed up with. In all honesty, tell me: is that your heart’s desire? Do you wish to roam the streets of any Wasteland town, following the tracks of a good-for-nothing schemer who thinks he can take over the world? Trust me, I’ve seen a few, and he will lead you to perdition.”

“You see, House, while I will give you that he gets a little too fired up with his plans and his plots; Farsight is

a very sensible pony, and I hardly think he'll take me to a dead end. If he does, though, I'll make him regret it."

"Thanks." I whined.

"Don't mention it." Lavender grinned smugly. "I know where you're leading me to, House, and let me warn you: I won't fall for it. With his ups and his downs, Farsight is the pony my loyalties are up to."

"Thanks." This time, I said it without irony.

"Well, I am frankly impressed, Farsight." House whistled. "I never thought you would be able to keep such an element in a leash."

"Haven't I already told you that I can't be played with?" I grinned.

"Watch what you say..." House boomed, and three more turrets popped out of the ceiling, forcing us to duck and cover.

I had been noticing a constant improvement of the signal quality from Full House's broadcast as we moved inside the Casino, and I had been carefully following my ear to try to locate where he was emitting it from. The lower levels of the Platinum Horseshoe could be a massive labyrinth, and we had no time or will to spend finding a hidden pony by means of systematic trial and error. For that, however, we needed him to talk.

Turrets weren't that much of a challenge for us. The entirety of the team had shooting experience, and even Rose was weathered in such things, so the defense system didn't last too long. Anyway, I had the feeling that Full House wanted us to be in there. The level of resistance he was showing was close to none, and even if most of his robots were fighting on the streets, that didn't explain the ease with we were moving through the basement.

"You have stripes!" House whistled suddenly. "I hadn't really noticed, Nadyr."

"Check your sight, fool." Nadyr laughed. "It's not like they're so hard to see."

"So you are a zebra after all..."

"A half-zebra, please."

"How unfortunate. My condolences."

"For what?"

"For you being such an abomination. Don't you know? Ponies hate zebras, but they hate half-zebras more. Let me guess, you've been shunned all of your life."

"That's no real guess. It's everyday Wasteland."

"But aren't you bitter? Aren't you resentful of being constantly subjected to pony authority, to the hate and the dictatorship of those who designated you as their target practice?"

"Careful, Nadyr..." I whispered.

"Come on, Nadyr, be honest with me. You must have regretted being born. You must have felt shame for your condition, at least once in your life."

"Every single day of my existence, there must be one pony that asks me that same question." Nadyr huffed. "What is it with your unsolved guilt complex that you have to keep pestering me with the same issue?"

"Guilt complex? Me?" House laughed. "Don't get me wrong, Nadyr, I don't feel guilty. All this matter beyond zebras and ponies is beyond me, as they all pay in the same currency. I am a businesspony, and therefore, matters like petty racism and historic revenges are not in my agenda. They are bad for business. However... I see you surrounded by three ponies, and I bet that none of them thinks the way I do. Have you ever confronted Farsight and asked him what his opinion on zebras is?"

"N-no, not really." Nadyr doubted. I had to admit that Full House was a true charmer. He knew how to use his voice and his words to cause confusion, to exacerbate or to eliminate feelings.

“Then, why don’t you ask the question you are afraid to ask?”

“Because...”

“You know you would feel much better if you set things straight with your alleged friends, Nadyr. Ask the question that’s been itching you inside.”

“That’s... pointless.” Nadyr was fighting with himself.

“Is it?” House whispered evilly. “If it’s as pointless as you say, why are you in such a fluster?”

“That’s because you’re making this to me!” Nadyr growled.

“No, you’re making this to yourself.” House said sternly. “You want to know the answer, but at the same time, you are afraid of what it might be. Those ties will be with you unless you break them and free yourself of the burden you’ve been carrying since the day of your birth!”

A convincing speech, I had to give House that point. Still, I believed in Nadyr being able to get over it.

“Farsight...” The half zebra looked at me with anguish in his eyes. “Tell me the truth, please.”

“The truth?” I smiled calmly, as if nothing was going on. House had turned all that issue into something big and painful, where there was little more than a fireside chat with a warm cup of coffee. “Listen to me, my friend. All of that is ridiculous. Whatever happened two centuries ago is long gone. I’ve lived in a Stable and I have heard a lot of crap about the zebras doing this, the zebras doing that and whatnot; and I won’t lie to you, the first time we met I did get a little anxious. However, after all we’ve been through, I can say for sure that striped or not, we can all get along properly.”

“Oh yes, and what about the ponies that harassed me as a child? Or the zebras, who didn’t like me either?”

“Nadyr,” I said as soothingly as possible, “the world is unfair and unforgiving. Many of those who disliked you did that driven by the fear of the unknown. If those very ponies met me they would despise me as well; and I’m not supposed to mean any danger to them, am I?”

“Besides, Nadyr, we’ve been together long enough to know what moves us.” Rose intervened suddenly.

“Don’t you think that we’re over racial quarrels already?”

“Rose...” The half zebra blinked, puzzled. “You really think so?”

“Of course we do, you moron!” The filly laughed clearly, and it felt like everything had gotten brighter for a second. “Don’t you see what House is trying to do? He wants us to fight each other, to forget what we came here for. Remember that Dee is fighting out there with your two unborn foals in her, and if we don’t succeed now, we might regret it beyond ourselves. Come on, Nadyr, we are a team; and as such we need to push.”

“Rose is right.” I added. “You know, I sometimes lack the finesse she has to say things, and I think she has made my point pretty clear. No matter what you are, I need you by my side. Forget what this geezer is saying and let’s carry on. I think we’re almost there.”

Nadyr shook his head, as if he wanted to get rid of something, then he smiled again and looked at the speakers in the corners.

“Sorry, Full House, but I think that shot went right out the wrong end. I’ll admit it, you almost had me for a moment, but there are some things stronger than my past or the pattern of my coat, and those are my friends. I wouldn’t let them down under any circumstance.”

“Well, what a pity.” House whined. “I could have used a good fighter such as you to replace the late and disgraced Rocky Shade.”

“I will have to decline your offer. Other interests are more powerful.”

“I should have counted on that.” House mumbled. “What about you, Snake Eater? I know much about you and your troublesome past... I know that you were one of the first volunteers to the NER army... or was it the NCR then?”

“It was th’New Canterlot Republic then, yes.”

“What happened then was so sad and regrettable... twelve years of peace and then, another revolution, another coup d’etat. Where were you exactly?”

“Almost at th’Divide, scouting fer a way thru.” Snake’s voice was sad.

“Far from home, far from New Canterlot, and then...”

“Yes... ah couldn’t help at all.”

“Couldn’t you?” House laughed. “Come on, Snake Eater. Anypony could have seen that coming... the constant demonstrations demanding for the Light Bringer to return from Exile... the frequent attacks on the new Government... and then, the President was murdered.”

“An’t’h’army rose.”

“Claiming the foundation of the New Equestrian Republic under the supreme rule of the Light Bringer. You could have resisted, as many did, but you fled. You were scared and galloped into the Divide, looking for shelter from the storm. Now, I don’t blame you, as you took the wisest possible decision; but I am very sure that you will have regretted that very day ever since.”

“It’s been on mah mind every night.”

“But after the years, you found your peace of mind, working as a bodyguard, with the NER separated by a magic barrier they couldn’t cross. However, they managed to get through and walk right into the heart of New Pegasus. I can imagine your anger when you saw their banner rise in Freedom Field.”

“Yer assuming many things, House.” Snake Eater tried to keep calm, but he was stirred in the inside.

“I am convinced that I am assuming them right, Snake Eater. Now, do you know that you’re walking right beside the pony that shook hooves with the Republic and opened the gates for them? That shouldn’t be a pleasant revelation.”

Snake Eater looked at me questioningly, and I feared for the worst. Full House might have found our weak spot, and he might be able to use it against us. However, Snake laughed and winked in a friendly way.

“Ah can’t be mad at’im. Whatever’e did, Freedom Field is gettin’ bigger an’ bigger every day, an’ ponies wanna live there. My past with th’ NER is mine t’solve, an’ maybe ah should be grateful with’im fer having brought’em to my door.”

“Thank you, Snake Eater.” I sighed in relief.

“Yer welcome, Farsight. Now, let’s get this phoney.”

I nodded. The last words of Full House had sounded very clear, and we had walked all the way to an antechamber with a large double door on one end. My bet was that House’s control center was right behind the mentioned gates, so I walked forward to meet my foe and settle things once and for all. The door opened hissing, and as soon as I crossed it, it jammed shut and all the alarms fired.

“What is going on?” Rose yelled.

“Farsight, are you alright?” Nadyr asked from beyond the steel door.

“I’m fine!” I yelled. “But the door is being remotely controlled. I need to find a way out.”

“Roboponies!” Snake Eater screamed. “Helluva lot of’em! Get ready to hold!”

The sound of gunfire barrage began to drown the voices of my companions, making me gulp in anguish. I needed to find a way of stopping the alarms and joining my mates, or at least finding them a way out of the ambush. However, I seemed to be standing on a dead end, as the room was in the dark and there didn’t seem to be any control consoles close.

“Trapped, Farsight?” House’s voice gurgled gleefully.

“House! This was your plan all along, wasn’t it?” I roared in anger. “Show yourself!”

“If that is what you wish...”

The lights of the room went on suddenly, making me flinch and cover my eyes. Once the initial flash was gone, I found myself looking at a large pod full with greenish fluid, in which the body of a pony was floating, connected to a series of cables that jacked into sockets in the back of his head. His bright coat and dark mane, coupled with the dandy moustache left no doubt of who I was looking at... Full House, in flesh and bone.

“What on Equestria...?”

“This?” House giggled. “I can’t believe you didn’t see it coming, Farsight. There are many things that couldn’t be explained assuming that I was a living pony, like for example how could I have survived since before the War.”

“You could be a ghoul, or an identity thief. After all, who could have proven you wrong?”

“That wouldn’t have worked. Sooner or later, somepony would have caught me on an uncomfortable situation.”

“Whatever... What the hell is this?” I waved my hoof towards the machine.

“Do you really want to know? Aren’t you worried about your companions?”

“They can handle themselves.” I smiled malevolently. “And yes, I really want to know. You’ve got a lot of explaining to do.”

“This is a Stable-Tec Stasis Container, a little gift from Scootaloo herself. I wanted to keep control over the empire I had built so long ago, and when I found out I was suffering a terminal disease, I acquired this lifesaver. Its peculiarity, though, is that my brain is kept in a conscious state while connected to a maneframe terminal. That is how I managed to keep awake and alive for two centuries, watching and listening to all the news and rumours that plagued the Wasteland; and that is why I am so powerful now.”

“But you’re tied to the Casino.”

“Who cares, really, when New Pegasus is the only worthwhile thing in the whole Wasteland. I’ll admit it, when the NCR was born I began paying attention to the world beyond the Divide, but until the NER managed to cross it, there was little I could want from them. Now, on the other hoof, I am definitely going to profit from that... and you can do so too.”

“Cut it out, House.”

“Won’t you even listen to me? Farsight, you are trapped and your friends are under heavy fire. If you keep being so stubborn, you won’t be able to save them. I am offering you the life of those you care about and the chance to rule New Pegasus by my side. I am giving you the chance to become the most important pony in Neighvada. You wanted to be a leader, didn’t you?”

“Who said that? I never mentioned wanting to be a leader.”

“Leader or not, my offer is simple: power and wealth in company of those you care for. Try to do anything else, and you’ll end up alone and broke, and all of those who you called friends will be dead and gone; and once that is done, I shall have you killed.”

“House, I have had enough of your stupid offers and senseless threats.” I grumbled.

“And what do you intend to do, little one?” House laughed.

Silently, I galloped to the maneframe and connected my PipBuck to it. The integrated hacking system began to fight the many security protocols Scootaloo had installed in Full House’s life support device. I could almost hear House taking a deep breath in anguish as he saw himself cornered; but on the outside, he appeared to be calm and mocking.

“Do you really think you can hack my Container, Farsight? You and your little PipBuck are no match for the defences of my computer!”

“Reeeeeeally.” I smirked, as I saw one barrier fall after another. “What you don’t know is that my little PipBuck has been enhanced with the Stable-Tec security libraries. I’ve hacked more complex systems than yours, House. Enjoy your last minutes of life.”

“What?” House gasped. For the first time he realized how endangered he was. Suddenly, the alarm shut down and the shooting stopped. “Please, Farsight, let’s be reasonable. Let’s not take any decisions we might regret, OK? I have a lot to give you, if you let me live! I’ll teach you how to govern this city! I’ll be your counsellor, your voice of experience! Listen to me, Celestia-dammit!”

“Too late, House. The old must die to make way for the new. Rest in fucking peace, you abomination.”

With a last click, the control system opened wide and I selected the option of ‘disconnecting living body’ from the Stasis Pod. With a last gurgling ‘no’, Full House’s existence ended in three minutes. So much for two centuries of endurance against Nature.

I also reopened the gates, and Rose and Nadyr galloped to meet me. The two of them looked tired and worn out, but they had no apparent wounds or burn marks. Snake Eater was nowhere to be found, though.

“Farsight, are you alright?” Rose hugged me.

“Yes, I took care of House.” I sighed.

“House? Is that him?”

“Yes, a machine kept him alive and kicking... but no more.” I smiled. “Now we own the Platinum Horseshoe.”

“That’s my buck!” Nadyr gave me a tight embrace. “I effing knew you would make it!”

“Thanks, Nadyr.” I nodded. “Where’s Snake Eater?”

Rose looked at the floor with a sad expression, almost crying.

“He took a laser shot right at the chest. There was nothing I could do.”

“That’s a disgrace.” I grunted. “He was a fine soldier, I will miss him. However, I guess that’s the end he would have wanted; showing bravery in battle. Once a soldier, always a soldier, don’t they say?”

“I guess...” Rose sighed.

“We only need to honor him properly; and I swear I will look after that.”

Rose nodded and gulped, hiding her tears.

“What are we going to do now?” Nadyr asked.

“Give me a minute.”

I returned to the computer and began fiddling with the control systems. I entered the robot programming controls and rerouted them to my PipBuck, giving me direct command over Full House’s armies. A couple of button presses and the roboponies switched their pony face to my Cutie Mark, the ornate red eye. It gave them quite a menacing look, to be honest.

“Damn, they look scary now.” Nadyr laughed.

“Of course, they will learn to fear our wrath.” I replied.

“Who?”

I smiled cunningly and activated the broadcasting function of Full House’s maneframe. Then, I moved the microphone to my muzzle and sent a clear and irrefutable message:

“To the Ferratura Family.” I said coldly. “I am Farsight, the pony you sentenced to death in the dark corridors of the Platinum Horseshoe. As you can see, I have managed to take over Full House’s enterprise and his armies, and I shall make one thing clear: you have no idea of what I am capable of. This will be no easy competition, like it was the case when the deceased House was in charge. This is a hostile takeover. I will run you over and I shall take all what’s yours and keep it for me. You chose a very powerful enemy when you decided to betray me, Ferraturas. This means WAR.”

I cut the communication and dropped the microphone with unhidden rage. Nadyr came along and passed a

foreleg behind my neck.

“All right! Let’s roll out and give them hell!”

#

Note: Reputation Change

Full House Group: Owned. You have taken over Full House’s domains, and now your banner can be seen hanging from the Horseshoe Spire.

Ferratura Family: War. The time for subtleties is over. Prepare to fight for your life.

New Equestrian Republic: Angry. The outbreak of violence in New Pegasus has caused the NER to deploy a conquest force against the city, and it’s your job to stop the conflict before it comes to happen.

## 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 robopony 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 powderized 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.

“STEEEEEEL 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 yo 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.

## Chapter 18: I Want It All

*“Good morning, listeners, and welcome to another hour of music and fun in your favourite station, New Pegasus Radio! I am Mister New Pegasus, taking you through the night and into another day, and remember, this day could be a marvelous one, it could even be the best day of your life; it all depends on what you do about it! Now, about the music we’ve been listening to, it’s a modern classic by the all-time favourite of New Equestria, Velvet Remedy! I’ll be honest with you folks, she’s starting to get a little old, but her musical prowess is still as good as it’s always been. Can’t get tired of listening to her, that’s for sure!*

*Let’s make a little stop to talk about the news, shall we? The conflict in the streets of New Pegasus and Freedom Field is finally cooling down, thank the Goddesses. There are still some spots around the Clops Casino where there is still some fighting going on, but most of the Strip has now been secured by the roboponies of Full... oh, wait, by Farsight’s roboponies. You will have to excuse me, but I am still getting used to this new turn of events in town. I will need some time to assimilate that the Platinum Horseshoe is no longer under Full House’s control.*

*As per popular demand, our research department has tried to find out something more about the mysterious new owner of the Horseshoe, and from the looks of things, the potential new proprietor of the Clops. To be frank, there is few we could obtain about the former life of this gentlecolt. Apparently, he appears in Freedom Field some months ago, working as an associate to the current Mayor of the neighboring town, and he is presumed to have ties with the NER. He bought his Citizenship with Republican aid around two months ago, and has been living in New Pegasus ever since. What he did before Freedom Field and what he’s been doing these weeks is a mystery.*

*Now that I’ve mentioned Freedom Field, the violence and chaos of the last few days ended with an assault to the Ferratura stronghold there, according to the numerous reports that arrive from the other end of the walls. Apparently, the heir of the Family, Verrazano Ferratura, was killed in the last attack, leaving his troops in confusion and disarray. The rest of the information that we have is, to say the least, sketchy. Some speak of Steel Ranger involvement in the conflict, when the last mention of the Rangers in Neighvada was around two years in the past. The rest speak of an assault team driven by a zebra and a filly, but none of the versions seem to match.*

*Looking beyond the city limits, the so awaited arrival of the New Equestrian Republic has not yet come to happen. We still don’t know what has caused them to stop their advance, but we can be thankful to the Goddesses for giving us some time to sort our things out before they get to our gates. At least, the situation has been pacified enough to negotiate a sort of truce or non-aggression treaty... although I’m no diplomat, and I trust that the City Board will have something ready to deal with the situation. Speaking of which, where is the Board right now, when we need of their leadership?*

*I’m starting to think that the population of New Pegasus has trusted a bit too much in their leaders. For many years we lived under the firm guidance of politicians who haven’t faltered in the times of need and have taken the right decisions in the right moments. This has turned us bland and trusting, and when worse leaders have taken upon themselves the task of surveying the city, we haven’t been aware enough to bring them down. Now the NER is knocking at our door and there doesn’t seem to be nopony who can actually stop them. Mares and gentlecolts, I think that we got what we deserved.*

*OK, I am getting too political again... let’s go with some more music! Now, let me see what I can find around here... Oh, this is something you will certainly like! I’ve got this little recording here of the Experimental Sessions of Vinyl Scratch, a unique piece that a generous trader sold me for a few caps. He didn’t know the jewel he was carrying in his saddlebags, but now it’s for all of you to enjoy! And remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking directly to your souls...”*

The pain was finally gone.

I felt like floating in a peaceful ocean of a thick fluid, slowly drifting away in an indeterminate direction,

with my mind free to roam and think about all I had been through in the last times. I didn't know where I was, nor did I care. This wasn't the Wasteland, where a step in the wrong direction would bring pain and destruction; nor was it New Pegasus, a nest of radscorpions disguised as a beacon of civilization. Whatever this place was, it felt good and I didn't want to break the peace of mind that I had found.

I had been very careless in the attack on the Diamonds. If Nadyr had been a step further away, the bullet that had destroyed my leg would have hit me in the head, and there would have been no more Farsight. Then again, if I hadn't wasted any second enjoying the moment, I would have been able to shoot Verrazano without him noticing, and nothing of the following would have happened. I would have been perfectly healthy and things would have gone according to my plan.

Now, nothing was going to be the same. The shot had turned my hindleg into a bloody mess, with fur ripped off, bone reduced to dust and flesh torn into smithereens; and even if the pain was gone, I would never be able to walk again. My hubris had turned me into a cripple, and even if I had won the petty war against the Ferraturas, I would have to suffer the constant reminder of my weakness every time I took a step. I wanted to cry in anger, but then again, it didn't seem like I was in my body at all.

It was a funny feeling, and the realization of it drove me away from my anger and my remorse. What had driven me to such a state of detachment from my body? Was it the work of healing magic, or was it a side effect of the chemicals used to keep me asleep? Then, a strange thought went through my head: maybe I was dead. Maybe the blood loss had been so critical that I hadn't survived the wound; and that strange feeling was what lies beyond the last breath.

Then again, I had no reason to believe that. I was feeling things, although very distantly. The sensation of being drifting in a thick liquid was something my mind had made up from a fact: I was touching something with my back, something that was soft and firm... It could be a bed, a mattress of some sort. I remembered Ampera ordering Nadyr to take me to the Fort... could that be where I was now?

That revelation triggered something in my mind, and I began to feel more of what surrounded me. I could hear the voices of ponies speaking, muffled by the distance, and the noise of hooves against the dusty floor. My process of returning to the world of the living was like that, progressive and fairly uncanny. What I missed was the pain, though. I remembered how much it had hurt, I had the image stored in my mind. It should hurt, it had to be there, nagging, but it wasn't.

"I think he's coming back." I heard a familiar voice say. "The little bugger is harder than we believe."

"I told you that it would work." A mare replied. Was that Ampera?

"To be honest, I had never performed such an operation before. Your help was precious, ma'am."

"Our Order was born to serve." It had to be Ampera. "Some forgot about it on the way."

"You know..." I mumbled. "That I can hear you..."

"Goodness me!" The other voice had to be Mixer's. That accent couldn't be mistaken. "You're finally awake, mate! Welcome back, for a moment I thought we were going to lose you!"

I narrowly opened my eyes and let them get used to the light, just to fully open them a moment later, and I found myself looking at the decaying face of Mixer at about a hoof's distance. Luckily for me, my sense of smell was still rebooting.

"Mixer, from all the ponies I would like to wake up next to, you would be on the bottom of the list." I groaned. "However, you can't even imagine how happy I am to see you right now."

"I'll take that as a compliment." Mixer composed a toothless smile. "You've recovered surprisingly fast, Farsight. It seems like you had a lot of unfinished business."

"You don't want to know, Mixer." I smiled ironically. "However, I hardly think my leg will let me do them."

"About your leg..." Mixer hummed. "It had been very heavily damaged... The bones were almost sawdust and the tendons of the knee were beyond repair... not even the best of healing potions or magic would put it back together."

“I see.” I clenched my teeth.

“Don’t fret though.” Mixer laughed. “This wonderful lady here came with a solution.”

I turned my head and watched Ampera’s electric-blue face smiling gently. She looked far less imposing without her Ranger armor, but she kept infusing a certain awe and respect.

“As soon as I saw the state your leg had been reduced to, I began to think on a mechanical solution that might help you overcome that problem. You know, when a Steel Ranger suffers wounds in the battlefield, it needs to carry on fighting until the battle is over. Apart from deflecting damage, the Ranger Armor acts as a life support system, reducing the load and increasing the strength of a damaged limb in order to let it heal while the pony can keep using it properly.”

“Exactly.” Mixer nodded. “Ampera thought that such a function could apply to your situation. Your leg will never heal properly per se, as it has suffered too much damage and the bones will not regenerate adequately. Leaving things as they are would have you in need of aid to be able to move, and totally incapable of running, jumping or bucking. However, with the proper modifications, that problem could be easily averted.”

“You should take a look at your hindlegs, Farsight.” Ampera smiled.

I did as she told me and turned my head to look at my rear, and what I saw made me gasp in a mixture of awe and surprise. My two hindlegs were not soft and furry anymore, but instead they shone in a menacing metallic blue, similar but not fully equal to that of my coat. The design was sleek, with scale-like plates forming a hexagon pattern that spanned from my flank to my hooves.

“What... what did you do to my legs?” I whined.

“Nothing at all!” Mixer replied calmly. “Your legs, your flesh and bone are still there, but they have been covered by the implant.”

“I prefer to call it ‘augmentation’.” Ampera corrected. “They’re not an implant, properly speaking, because the original limb is still there. The steel lattice has been woven to your bones and the joints are powered by servodrives that work in conjunction with a spell matrix especially devised to relieve the stress from those limbs and give you an extra buck, should you need it.”

“But if one of my legs was perfectly fine... why did you ‘augment’ both of them?”

“Installing the device in one of your hindlegs would have imbalanced you. In the end, it would be as if your healthy leg was weak and atrophied. The damages would be far greater than the benefits. By having both your hindlegs empowered, that disequilibrium problem should be solved.”

“And what happens with the balance between front and back?” I asked.

“I don’t think that’s a real problem. Your hindlegs are always stronger than your forelegs, because ones were meant to buck in case of danger. Giving them an extra boost shouldn’t cause you any trouble. However, if you feel uncomfortable or strange come see me, and I will try to find a solution that works for you.”

I sighed and realized how much the former Ranger had done for me in the last times. Not only had she been crucial for the welfare of my mission, but she had also given me a second chance by repairing my broken body. Despite all my initial quarrels with her, I found out that I really appreciated Ampera. She was a kind and noble soul, even if a little jaded by the world she lived in.

“Thanks, Ampera. You really saved my life.”

“Don’t mention it.” Ampera waved a disregarding hoof. “In the end, you are responsible for the boost Freedom Field has experienced lately. Consider it a way of repaying you for your services.”

“If you put it that way...” I shrugged. “By the way, Ampera, where did you get all the materials?”

“When I left the Order, I made sure that they would regret having cast me out.” Ampera laughed softly. “I ransacked the supply warehouse of the Contingent and left them to the Raiders. I think they were able to last for... a week, maybe?”

“Remind me not to piss you off, Ampera.” I squinted.

“If you’re wise, you won’t even try.” The ex-Ranger shook her head. “Well, now that you appear to have recovered, I’m off to repair the Tesla Bar. Those Ferratura idiots didn’t behave like perfect gentlecolts during their stay.”

She turned around and left the tent while humming a tune, while Mixer walked around checking data graphs and readings. As soon as Ampera was gone, he turned around and whistled.

“Quite a mare, innit, mate?” Mixer fumbled around. “I’ve got to admit that I was a little doubtful when she came with those metal covers for your legs, but she didn’t give me any room to object. Turns out that it was for the best.”

“I hope so...”

“Hope is all we got, mate. Apart from that, there’s bugger all. Now, move your lazy arse and get your hooves on the ground! It’s time you start testing your new gadget.”

I nodded and crept out of the bunk bed, putting the tips of my hooves on the floor with a mixture of fear and curiosity. Would the mechanic devices work, or would I end up facefirst on the dirt? It was true that the pain was gone, probably as an effect of the spell matrix; but I had no guarantee that my broken leg would withstand the weight of my body, even with the help of the augmentations.

“Come on!” Mixer cheered me. “Have a little faith, Farsight!”

I gulped and made the final move out of the bed... to find out that I was standing perfectly on my four legs. The mechanic aid that Ampera had built for me worked, and my broken hindleg was not being a problem at all. I walked up and down carefully, but as soon as I felt that my body could resist the wear and tear of walking and carrying weight, I even dared to take a little jump.

“This is fucking fantastic!” I laughed in glee.

“It is, indeed.” Mixer nodded. “Don’t try anything crazy, though, like jumping off a rooftop.”

“Who do you think I am?” I raised my brow and smiled.

“Just warning you, mate.” Mixer shrugged. “I’ve seen my share of stupid over the years.”

“Sure, sure.” I smiled. “By the way, Mixer, how long have I been knocked out?”

“Hmm... two days. Yes, two days more or less.”

“Two days? What happened with the NER? Are they here?”

“No, they’re not here; which is quite strange, actually.” Mixer rubbed his chin and some flakes of rotten skin fell to the floor. “According to the radio, they were supposed to arrive yesterday. However, I have no idea of what might have happened to them.”

“Alright. Thanks, Mixer.” I walked over to my suit and got quickly dressed. “I think I will carry on from here.”

“Sure. Good luck, Farsight, although I think you won’t need much of it.”

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“FARSIGHT!!!”

The fact that I expected it didn’t make it less abrupt, as Rose attack-hugged me as soon as I left the tent. The filly had tear marks on her face, which led me to think that she had been crying recently; because of my fate, I believed. I hugged her back and patted her softly, trying to comfort her as much as I could. After all, I had been unconscious all that time. Who knows what she had been through?

“Farsight, you’re alright...” Rose sobbed.

“Yes, a little shaken, but I’m fine.” I whispered.

“But your leg... I thought you would never be able to walk again.”

“Me too. Then again, we hadn’t counted on Ampera’s crafting prowess.” I smiled. “She was the one that did the proper repairs on me.”

“Repairs?” Rose looked puzzled. “What repairs?”

“Take a look at my hindlegs, Rose. Notice something different?”

“No, they’re... HOLY CELESTIA!” Rose yelled. “What happened to your legs?”

“My legs are in there... apparently.” I shrugged. “Ampera built a spell-matrix powered set of augmentations, something similar to the systems used by the Steel Rangers in their armors. That’s what keeps me on my four legs and lets me walk.”

“They are... amazing!” Rose moved around me and took a closer look. “So shiny and tough-looking...”

“Well, at least she painted them blue. They go unnoticed in the first look.”

“That is true, although I think they are a bit brighter than your fur. Anypony with a keen eye will find the difference.”

“I don’t really mind... it would sound as if I was complaining about them.” I shook my head. “That’s not my intention at all.”

“Sure.” Rose smiled. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit battered, but fine. The healers did a nice job, and now it’s me who has to carry on. We still have a lot of things to sort out before we can lay back and relax.”

“Are you always thinking about your plans, Farsight? You almost got crippled forever!”

“I know, Rose...” I sighed. “Some things, or more properly, some ponies won’t be as understanding as you are, though.”

“Farsight, the Republic is not here yet, and the Ferraturas are dug in in the Clops.” Rose chastised me.

“Things are under control, and you’re back among us to sort them out. Can’t you afford a minute of rest?”

“Fine, fine...” I lowered my head in defeat. “How have you been all this time, Rose? I should have asked you before, but I am terribly impolite.”

“At least you admit it.” Rose smiled sadly. “Well, I’ve had better days, that is undeniable. I was very worried about you, and Mixer didn’t seem very confident at first. The state of your leg was so bad that the poor buck couldn’t decide on what to do. Then Ampera came and they got into the surgery tent with you. They wouldn’t let me in to watch, so I had to wait the whole night here until they told me you were stable.”

“I’m sorry, Rose. I’m very sorry.” I mumbled, feeling a tear roll down my cheek. I guess that all the stress we had been through was finally transpiring off my body.

“There is no need to be sorry, Farsight.” Rose hugged me once again. “You’re fine, and that’s all that matters.”

“Thanks, Rose.” I hugged her back. “I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

“Cut it out.” Rose giggled.

“By the way, Rose... do you know what happened to the NER?”

“I think they got cut off by a Divide Storm that hit yesterday. Apparently, they were forced to back off and find shelter in Nobuck.”

“That will buy us some time, no doubt.”

“Farsight!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“I have an idea. Let’s go have some lunch, and after that, we discuss as many things as you want to.” Rose smiled. “But please, no scheming before!”

“Deal.” I nodded.

We left the Fort and walked down the main street of Freedom Field to the LaGrande’s, the restaurant in which I had met Metronome and Dee some time ago to plot her rise to power. Now the place was crammed with ponies of all sorts, from Wastelanders to New Pegasus citizens, who had reacted to the end of the conflict by jumping to the streets in a sort of celebration. We did turn some heads around as we walked to a table, and I swear that more than one of the ponies looking at us were gazing at my newly improved hindlegs.

“I’m not used to being looked at like this.” I mumbled.

“They’ll get used to your metal legs, Farsight.” Rose replied carelessly. “I am your friend, and look how I reacted. Those who don’t know you will act similarly, don’t you think? It’s not common to see a pony with steel hindlegs.”

“You’ve got your point there.” I smiled. “What should we order?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who has been here before, I’ll let you choose.”

“In that case, we should go for the gecko steak. It wasn’t half bad when I last had it.”

Rose nodded and placed the order, and the waiter disappeared into the kitchen. The filly then looked at me and smiled kindly, but with a maturity in her expression that surprised me. She had grown up quite a lot ever since we met, and she would become a very fine mare in no time; the kind of pony one wants as a friend. I was very lucky to have found her in the Wasteland.

“We’ve been through quite a hoofful of moments, haven’t we?” She laughed.

“Indeed... it’s been a rough ride.” I nodded. “But then again, we were nothing and now we are something.”

“You were a nopony, and I was a weak filly in the Wasteland... it was fate who put us together.”

“You can call it fate.” I said, while the waiter brought the dishes with the meat on them. “You might call it chance as well. Luck. This entire city was built around that very concept of chance and luck. Wouldn’t surprise me one bit if those two forces had conspired to make us meet.”

“Maybe.” Rose took a bite of her steak. “Still, I prefer to think there is a fate involved. Some uncanny force that guides ponies to do what they do... It makes me think that all that has happened in my life has a reason behind it... and a purpose.”

“That very idea is the one that makes me reject it.” I nommed a piece of meat. “Fate leaves you helpless against the things that happen to you, especially against the bad things. Was I destined to leave the Stable? Was I forcefully going to end up doing all that I have done? I don’t like that... it lacks a sense of agency. I think that there are governing laws that make the world tick, but beyond that it’s just our will, our mind, and a pinch of chance to stir up the mix.”

“That would make life meaningless, don’t you think?”

“Meaningless?” I smiled. “Not at all. The meaning of life is what you make of it. When the Overmare cast me out of the Stable, I could have tried to get back in, I could have cried, I could have laid to die in the tunnel; but I didn’t. I could also have left New Pegasus for good and have ventured into the Wasteland; but I chose to stay. We are the ones who has brought us to what we are now, not an uncanny fate!”

“What about all the pain we’ve been through, then? Was it our doing? Your leg, Stuka... do you blame it all upon you?”

“I have some responsibility, but it’s not my entire fault.” I shook my head. “We make mistakes, and those mistakes have consequences. We have to learn from those consequences, never to make those mistakes again. The Wasteland, for example. Was it destined to be like this?”

“I don’t know...” Rose looked down.

“Rose, I am not trying to chastise you or change your point of view. I want you to think for yourself, and if you really believe in fate, then stick to that belief; no matter what anypony tells you.”

“I... I don't really know if it was meant to end up like this.” Rose shook her head. “However, it would mean that somepony took the conscious decision of casting the megaspells. I prefer to believe it was fate.”

“That's the flaw in your reasoning, Rose.” I finished the steak. “We assume that ponies take decisions consciously, aware of which effects those decisions will bring; while the truth is that most of the time we don't really know what we are triggering. I am sure that the ponies and zebras who turned the world into a Wasteland had little idea of what they were unleashing. That's why it's just a mistake. A terrible mistake with disastrous consequences, but a mistake nonetheless. Our duty is to learn from that mistake to never make it again.”

“I see...” Rose nodded. “But I...”

“Hey hey! Look who's here!” Nadyr's voice boomed behind me, making me jump.

“Shit, Nadyr, you know I hate being sneaked upon!”

“Sorry, bro!” Nadyr gave me a hug, and I saw Dee behind him smiling gently at me. “We are so glad to see you back on your... well, what is that?”

“These two are Ampera's solution to a destroyed leg. This metallic thingies keep me standing up, and frankly, I feel great with them.”

“Aren't they... itchy, or something?”

“Not in my case.” I shrugged. “Also, thanks for being there to save my life. I owe you one.”

Nadyr waved a hoof, disregarding that last statement of mine, while Dee laughed dimly at his smug and overconfident reply.

“Nadyr told me about what happened to you in the Diamonds.” Dee said with an almost motherly voice while she and the half zebra walked to our side. “I was really worried, especially after what happened to Metronome.”

“How is she?” I asked.

“She passed away last night.” Dee shook her head. “I stood there by her side until the break of dawn, crying like a little filly... It felt as if I had lost a sister.”

“I am so sorry, Dee.” I lowered my head. “I honestly mean it.”

“We all have had losses in this war, Farsight.” Dee shook her head. “My only consolation is that we are winning it.”

“Verrazano Ferratura is dead, and Delvio and Novalis are under siege at the Clops. We will finish this.”

“What about the NER?” Nadyr asked.

“They will be here in a matter of minutes. I wanted to have a quick lunch before meeting them, but now that you're awake, I think the two of us should confront the Republic.”

“I agree.” I nodded. “We need to show them that we stand united and that the petty disputes that have brought them here are no more. I hope that is enough for them to leave us alone.”

“I hope so too. We shouldn't waste any more time, then.” Dee turned around and walked out of the restaurant. “Are you coming?”

“Lead the way.” I replied, and followed Dee outside.

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The New Equestrian Republic enjoyed making demonstrations of power, or so it could be devised from the show that they had set up to arrive at New Pegasus. Large chariots marked with the symbol of the NER Army flanked an entire platoon of elite Troopers clad in heavy armor that marched at the same beat. Flags and banners with the red, white and black emblem of the Republic fluttered in the desert wind as the entire detachment advanced like a mastodon of flesh and steel towards the two lone ponies that stood before the

gates of Freedom Field: us.

The platoons of troopers formed in three rows of ponies while a luxury chariot arrived from the rear end of the retinue. The military vehicles had rolled aside, forming an effective cover that encircled both us and the soldiers, while a peach-colored mare trotted out of the VIP chariot. She wore a black suit with the NER emblem and her curly mane was pink and blue. I remembered having seen that pony somewhere before. Behind her, a scarred stallion clad in trooper armor looked at me with evident disgust in his face. I didn't have trouble recognizing him: Stonetree.

"It seems like the NER loves showing off its war machine." Dee snickered.

"It most certainly does." I nodded. "From a psychologic point of view, I have no doubt that this would have some effect on the enemy, but frankly, I don't really care. We all know what our cards are, don't we?"

"Yes, but don't get too overconfident." Dee warned. "We don't know how they are going to react."

The mare walked towards us, looking rather annoyed, while we waited patiently one step away from the gates. Such a force to handle a meeting like ours was a bit overkill, even if we carried weapons on us.

"Welcome to New Pegasus!" I greeted, smiling broadly, as soon as the Republican envoy got within range. "I must admit that you have impressed me, although you're making me regret that we held this meeting in secret. If I had known that you would give us such a wonderful parade, I would have brought the entire population to witness this!"

Stonetree flinched at my words and almost jumped towards me in rage.

"Why you maggot!" He barked. "I won't tolerate such disrespect!"

The mare gave him a blood-chilling glare, making Stonetree stop dead on his tracks. The high-ranked trooper took a step back and returned to a neutral stance, although his face showed that he felt outraged by my lack of respect towards the mysterious mare that stood in the middle.

"Stonetree is a little bit harsh at times." She spoke with a soprano voice, melodious and graceful, although not lacking a certain rough undertone. "As a career soldier, he lacks the diplomacy required to handle such negotiations. I just carry him around for security."

"I understand that." I nodded peacefully. "I also assure you that there was no bad intention in my previous words. Honestly, such a display of coordination should have been enjoyed by everypony. By the way, I would love to know who I am talking to."

The mare smiled mischievously and cleared her throat.

"I am President Praline di Bon Bon of the New Equestrian Republic, and you are?"

"This is Dee Cleff, elected Mayor of the Free City of Freedom Field." I pointed at her while she nodded courteously. "And I am Farsight, de facto leader of the City of New Pegasus."

"You, leader of New Pegasus? Don't make me laugh!" Stonetree barked.

I knew that Stonetree didn't like me at all, and given how Praline had restrained him, I thought that exploiting that harshness could help me discredit him. That might give us an edge in the negotiation.

"Captain Stonetree..."

"It's General Stonetree now, maggot." He replied coarsely. "I am the Chief of Staff of the New Equestrian Army, so show me some damn respect."

"Stonetree..." Praline muttered.

"Fine, General Stonetree." I smiled ironically. "You know, many things have happened lately, and I have the feeling that you might have been a bit off the loop in the last times. You shouldn't act too surprised about my new position."

"Your new position, you say... I think you're trying to play with the Republic once more, you scumbag." Stonetree spat the words.

“It seems like you two have a backstory together...” Praline mumbled. “Mind putting me up to date, Stonetree?”

“Miss President, there is no time for this.” Stonetree grumbled. “I’ll give you a full report back at base.”

“I want to know, now.” Praline didn’t leave much room for a retort, but Stonetree was dubious.

“Excuse me, ma’am.” I intervened. “There’s not much of a story, to be very honest. Some months ago, I began working as a free agent for the NER under the command of Vice-President Harpsong Heartstrings, in order to pull off some black ops in the territory of Neighvada. That activity was what brought me to meet the General here, when he was still Captain.”

“And you two didn’t get along together, did you?” Praline raised her brows.

“Apparently not. I think that he didn’t like the Vice-President’s sneaky approach to conquest. I have nothing to say about it, I only did what I was hired for.” I shrugged.

“I understand that.” Praline shrugged as well. “As I have just told you, Stonetree lacks the diplomacy required to handle situations such as this one. He excels when handling wartime scenarios, but this is a totally different league.”

“I couldn’t agree more with you, miss President.” I nodded.

“Miss Cleff.” Praline turned to Dee, “Congratulations on your newly founded city.”

“Thank you, President.” Dee replied coldly.

“No problem.” Praline faked a smile. “OK, now that the introductions are done, let’s get down to business, shall we?”

“Of course.” I nodded.

“I assume you know what brought us here.” Praline looked at me with a cold glare.

“Most certainly. It’s been a fairly regrettable situation, this little conflict of ours. I am glad to inform you, though, that it is finally over. There are still some areas of resistance, but the majority of the insurgent forces have surrendered or fallen. We shouldn’t be too far away from a return to peace.”

“That is positive, but Republican assets have been attacked in the process. Our Supreme Leader doesn’t tolerate such insubordinations.”

“Supreme Leader?” I squinted. “I thought you were the President.”

“I am, but as everypony, I respond to a higher authority. I am the Head of Government of the NER, but our Leader is the Head of State.”

“And what does your Supreme Leader think about the independence of New Pegasus?”

“Our Leader is not to be bothered with such earthly issues. That’s what I am for. However, when the well-being of the members of the Republic is put at jeopardy, our Leader claims swift action.”

“Send my condolences to your leader and let him or her know that the authorities of New Pegasus are solving the problem efficiently. There is no need for Republican intervention here.”

“That is what you say, but our Leader thinks otherwise.” Praline spoke coldly.

“And what about you, miss President? Do you think for yourself or do you let your glorious Leader dictate all your actions?” I asked with evident anger at her fanaticism.

“I have my thoughts and points of view, of course.” She laughed dimly, menacingly. “However, orders are orders, and I abide them.”

“Miss President, Praline, your losses have been already avenged. The last remaining Ferratura forces are cornered and under siege. The NER embassies have been properly secured and the workers are all safe, beginning with Ambassador Merry Fields herself.”

“Then why isn’t she here?” Praline asked.

“Miss President.” Dee intervened calmly. “The Ambassador, such as many other ponies in town, is concentrating on recovering from the attack. Even if the situation is secure, we must evaluate the damages and begin repairing what was broken during the riots.”

“The Republic can’t trust a city that calls itself civilized and then breaks out into total chaos. Our Leader demands that the NER takes upon itself the responsibility of keeping the Cities of New Pegasus and Freedom Field safe.”

“You know we can’t accept that. Our independence is sacred and so it was signed in the treaties of cooperation between us and you.”

“I am aware of those treaties, but the conditions have changed.” Praline frowned. “An aggression against the NER cannot go unpunished.”

“Unpunished?” I asked out of sheer disbelief. “Haven’t we told you that the ponies that attacked the Republican assets have been killed or imprisoned?”

“Yes, you have. That won’t change our determination, though.” Praline didn’t seem willing to negotiate.

I considered the possibilities. There was few more we could do from a talkative point of view. Praline spoke like a clear fanatic, leaving little room to pry her in order to get a positive reaction. Whoever that Leader was, it was clear that it exerted an almost religious power over its followers, turning them into crazy and irreflexive puppets. From the looks of things, the NER was nothing more than a foul, theocratic regime that imposed the view of the Leader above any other opinion... or maybe not. Maybe it was something darker, something that was hidden in the shadows. After all, if every single pony in the Republic knew about the Leader, how come I hadn’t heard of it before?

Still, all those ramblings about the Leader didn’t change the fact that the military force deployed before our walls wasn’t only for show. The NER had the stern determination to bring us to compliance or to simply bring us down. After our last battles, we couldn’t afford to begin another war with such a powerful foe, so we needed to play smart and put all we had on the line. Risky as it was, I needed to attempt a gambit.

“You know, you don’t want to cross us.” I said coldly. “We can become a bigger pain that you can ever imagine.”

“Really?” Praline chuckled. “Do you want me to believe that bravado? You come here with nothing, while your city is still licking its wounds, telling me that you can mean trouble to the Republic? Look around and see what we’ve brought! This is just a detachment, the main Army is waiting beyond the Divide. At my word, they’ll begin the march towards New Pegasus, and your time will be over.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked calmly, yet sternly. “I know that your military might is undeniable, but I also know about your interests beyond Neighvada and Hooper Dam... Starting a war against us would mean that all the supply caravans traversing our territory would be hunted down and scuttled.”

“We would destroy you nonetheless.” Praline clenched her teeth.

“Yes, you would. In the meantime, however, your troops in the far Wastelands would suffer the lack of supplies and would die by the hundreds. Tell me, President Praline, are you willing to trade their lives for ours? How would you justify their deaths to your people?”

“Miss President...” Stonetree stammered.

“What is it, Stonetree?”

“I must advise you to proceed with care here.” The General looked worried. “As much as I dislike Farsight, he’s right when he mentions that our supply routes traverse Neighvada in a way that would give them a chance of seizing them without much trouble.”

“What do you mean by that, Stonetree?”

“It would be unwise to start a war while they have a chance of crippling our strategic lines like that. If we

want to make the move against New Pegasus, we would have to redirect our caravans through the mountains up North.”

“Through the mountains?” Praline roared. “You know how close that is to the Divide? That route is tremendously unsafe!”

“And that is why we discarded it, Miss President. However, a conflict with the Cities would turn our current route even more unsafe.”

“Miss President, if I may...” I smiled. My aggressive stance had made them less confident than before, and now it was time to hide the big stick and begin talking softly. “There is no need to embark upon a conflict that would bring nothing more than sorrow to all of us. We want our independence, and you want to keep your supply lines open. The current status quo enables that, then why should we change it?”

“The Republic can’t be attacked just like that!” Praline roared again.

“Once again, Miss President, I assure you that the ponies behind that despicable aggression have been defeated. We promise to keep respecting the Republican delegations inside our territory, and we will ensure the wellbeing of the caravans that move close to the City Walls. In exchange, you will keep our status as is. Is that fine?”

Praline was struggling with herself. Her own fanaticism didn’t allow her to see that the best outcome for her was to leave things standing and turn away. Stonetree, on the other hoof, had understood the delicate situation that the NER army had in Neighvada, but he had to struggle with both his hatred towards me and the President’s lack of will to reason.

“Miss President, as much as I dislike Farsight, I must admit that his proposal is the best for the interests of the Republic. I seriously suggest retreating and keeping a strong vigilance on the City. In the meantime, we’ll work in a different route to keep our troops supplied.”

“Ugh, I understand.” Praline growled. “We’ll retreat, for now. Keep one thing in mind, though: the Republic will be watching.”

“Alright everypony! Roll out!” Stonetree roared.

The war machine of the New Equestrian Republic began moving once again, this time in the opposite direction, as the armies retreated from the City Gates. Praline and Stonetree walked back into the VIP chariot, grumbling something I couldn’t get to understand. As soon as the troops and banners began to disappear in the horizon, I let go a long and deep sigh of relief.

“That was veeeeery close.” Dee shook.

“I know.” I huffed. “I can’t believe that we actually managed to pull this off. Anyway, I never thought that the NER could be ruled by such a stubborn mare.”

“She spoke about a Leader... is it something religious?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “It did sound like something of that kind, though. That turns the Republic into something very dangerous... We must be really careful, what brings me to something.”

“Tell me.”

“I think that we must stay together to be able to show any valid resistance to outsider threats. That’s why I wanted to propose you to demolish the inner wall.”

“Really? How will that make the two cities work, if there is no clear boundary?”

“There will be no more two cities, only one. The great city of New Pegasus and Freedom Field.”

“You’re always up for those long-sounding names, aren’t you, Farsight?” Dee smiled. “How do you intend to pull this off? I warn you from the beginning, if you want to overcome me, I won’t let you. I want my share of power as well.”

“Sure, I knew you would ask for that. I had thought on taking over the City Board: you, me, Rose, Nadyr,

Saddle and Ampera. The six of us working together to prevail against possible enemies that might attack us.”

“With you being the leader of the pack, right?” Dee snickered.

“That is something that can be discussed. I don’t enjoy being under the spotlight too much, and I think that such a role could be good for Rose, given her natural charisma and likeability. What do you think?”

“Honestly, ever since I was a filly I dreamt of getting to live in New Pegasus. With the turning of the years, I have learnt to survive and thrive in Freedom Field. However, now that you give me the opportunity to become a full citizen, I find it strangely compelling...”

“Dee, trust me, I am proposing this to you just because of that very feeling. I have also known what it is to watch the city lights from the other side of the wall, and I want to end that injustice now that I have the chance to do it. I just need your approval.”

“OK.” Dee sighed. “After all we have been through, I don’t think you’d be bold enough or stupid enough to try and trick me. You’ve got yourself a deal, Farsight.”

“Magnificent.” I smiled. “Now let’s return back inside. I don’t feel too comfortable in the open Wasteland without proper gear. Who knows who could attack.”

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The news of the NER’s retreat spread around town like an uncontrolled fire, and soon enough, everypony was cheering in the streets that the looming menace of a Republican takeover had been properly defused. Of course, still nopony knew who had responsible of the invading forces’ change of mind, but it would only be a matter of time until somepony leaked my name and Dee’s to the public. By that time, I wanted to have things sorted out in the Clops.

However, I headed back to my office on top of the Spire. First of all, I needed a rest after all the tension we had been through. Secondly, the best way of checking out how things were going was through Full House’s monitoring network. By locating the positions of all my robots I would be able to grasp how the siege of the Ferratura Casino was going. With a proper picture of the battle it would be much easier to decide which steps to take.

When I arrived to the top of the Platinum Horseshoe, I went for a quick shower and a change of suit. With some luck, the clothes that Full House had carefully stored in his quarters would be useful for me. If not, I guess I would be able to take them to a tailor to get them properly resized. As I was walking towards the lounge, I saw something that almost made me jump scared.

An elderly unicorn stallion was looking down the window, his face wrinkled and his eyes tired of the heavy load that life had put on his back. He dressed in style, with a tasteful grey overcoat on a dust-colored suit that fit perfectly with his moss-green coat and white mane. He was carrying a saddle-mounted walking stick system that helped him stay upright even if his legs were weak and frail.

“I always wondered how it would be to see the world from up here.” He said, almost absent-mindedly, although he knew that I was listening.

“Who are you, and how did you get into my office?” I asked.

“Well, son, nopony was guarding the entrance, so I walked in.” He tried to shrug. “If you’re so jealous about your privacy, you should learn how to lock your doors. About the first question, I have the feeling that you know who I am.”

“Novalis Ferratura, I presume.”

“You presume right, son.” Novalis nodded.

“How come you have managed to avoid the siege at the Clops?” I asked.

“What makes you think that I even was in the Clops, son?” Novalis laughed again. “Did you see me there the day you met Verrazano and Delvio?”

“No, I didn’t.” I replied.

“Because I wasn’t there. In fact, I moved away from the Casino the day I chose to pass the power down to my Family. Ever since, I’ve preferred to live as an anonymous pony.”

“I see. What brings you here today, Novalis?” I asked. “Have you come to ask for revenge for your dead son?”

“Young one, do I look like a pony capable of avenging a son’s death, at my age?” Novalis laughed calmly. “I think that your scheming has turned you more paranoid than I thought, Farsight.”

“One can never be too careful in these dire times.” I replied sternly.

“Yes, that is an axiom of our way of living.” Novalis nodded. “No, don’t think I have come here for revenge. My son Verrazano took his choices and faced the consequences. This is a hellhound-eat-hellhound world, no matter how beautiful and shiny the coating is. I tried to teach him to be careful and to not rely on sheer aggressiveness, but I failed to get into his thick mind.”

“You sound bitter.”

“That is because I am bitter. Verrazano was an embarrassment for me and the Family. I have devoted my entire life to a goal of peaceful leadership, and at the first sign of real threat, he starts an all-out war that even spread to Freedom Field and threatened to have us eaten by the NER! If that would have even come to happen...”

“It won’t anymore. He’s dead and the NER is retreating to beyond the Divide.”

“I know, I heard it on the radio. By the way, I have to congratulate you for your work dissuading the Republic. I don’t know which cards you played, but you managed to avoid the end of New Pegasus as we knew it.”

“I hope the radio isn’t saying that out loud.”

“No, rest easy.” Novalis laughed. “I have my sources out there, but they also appreciate discretion, almost as much as you do.”

“Being inconspicuous and unexpected is an advantage, I am pretty sure that you know that, Novalis.”

“Of course I do.”

“Fine...” I smiled. Novalis seemed frank enough to be likeable. As Badge had told me, he was a true gentlecolt, almost picked up from an earlier, more civilized age. “May I offer you something to drink?”

“No, don’t worry. I came here to talk, and then I’ll leave.”

“Perfect, then. Let’s talk.” I stood before him, looking at his elderly eyes. “What did you come here for?”

“I want to know of your intentions, Farsight.”

“My intentions?” I laughed. “It wouldn’t be too wise from me to reveal my plans to the enemy, don’t you think?”

“No, no, I don’t mean your current plans, Farsight. I know that my son is fighting a lost battle, and that you will rule this city. The only thing I want to find out, from a deposed ruler to an upcoming one, is what you intend to do with the lives of the ponies of New Pegasus.”

“Hm... I want the city to grow, that’s for certain.” I mumbled. “There is an outside force constantly threatening to overthrow us, and I intend to keep our independence at all costs.”

“At all costs?” Novalis asked. “Even by spilling the blood of your citizens?”

“My citizens will have to decide that. However, coming to a situation in which I have to choose between the city and the citizens would mean a total mistake for me.”

“You amaze me, Farsight.” Novalis smiled. “I had you for another selfish power-hogger, and you seem to worry about those around you.”

“That is where you have it wrong, Novalis. I am selfish, and I did all this for my own good. However, I know

that no ruler can live long without the support of his people, and less in this world.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Farsight.”

“There is no need for masquerades here, I think. After all, you said it yourself: you’re the deposed ruler and I am the upcoming one. Losing time in petty lies would be an insult to both our intelligences.”

“Not too fond of political correctness, either.” Novalis laughed. “When I was your age, I wasn’t all that careful either.”

“I’m not always like that.” I shrugged. “One’s stance must adapt to where and when he’s talking. I’ve had my fair share of bumps because of my big mouth, so I learned to find out what the best option was. Two eyes, two ears, one mouth. That should make us stop, look and listen before speaking.”

Novalis nodded.

“I never saw it put that way, but I have to admit that you’re right. Farsight, I like you. You seem to be an intelligent and careful pony; but with clear goals and great determination, as you have proven. I know what Verrazano and Delvio did to you, and still, you managed to turn the situation to your favor and now one is dead and the other is cornered. As long as you keep those standards, you have the potential to be a great leader.”

“Thanks for your kind words, Novalis. Frankly, I expected some more resentment from you.”

“I told you that I have no resentment... towards you, at least. If there are ponies to blame for the Ferratura Family’s downfall, those are my children. You are the force that has proven them wrong, the same way that you have showed that Full House was nothing more than a bluff.”

“If you put it that way, yes. We all gambled on the same table, and I got the highest cards in my hooves.” I shrugged. “Why all this, though? I have the feeling that you didn’t come here just to have a little friendly chat with your successor.”

“I wanted to know that I left the city in proper hooves.” Novalis looked sad. “After all, I regard New Pegasus as another child I’ve helped to raise and develop. I feel personally responsible for its growth and welfare, and my only wish I have in life is to be regarded as a pony who gave his soul to keep the population safe and booming.”

“Why do you say that, Novalis?” I asked.

“Because all is over now, with you overtaking the Clops and destroying what remains of my family. I will leave now and fade into darkness, taking the shot for the Family as I am expected to do.”

“What?” I asked. “That is absurd, Novalis. You are a pony of honor, and I am willing to give you the chance to live long and prosper beside us. You should be reminded as what you are, and I want to give you the chance for you to do so. Please, don’t do anything rash.”

“You are not going to show any mercy on the Ferratura Family. Why should I accept your proposal?”

“Novalis, you spoke of mistakes. This situation was Verrazano and Delvio’s mistake, and they’re going to pay for it. The Family had a way out, but now it’s gone, sadly.”

“A way out?” Novalis blinked in surprise.

“Sandmound.” I replied. “He was the one prepared to take the lead and continue with your labour, free from the taint of ambition that both Verrazano and Delvio had.”

“Ah, we finally come to this.” Novalis sighed. “My deceased grandson Sandmound and his tragic death. You don’t know who ordered his death yet, do you?”

“No, but I plan to find out.”

“Tell me, Farsight, why the sudden interest?”

“Because I feel that it symbolizes something in this city... The lack of innocence, of honesty and good will in the Wasteland. I don’t know why, but Sandmound looked like a chance for redemption. A wasted chance.”

“Redemption, you say... Farsight, I ordered his death.”

“You WHAT?” I almost jumped. “How could you, Novalis?”

“Farsight, Sandmound was good and noble, but also stupid. He lacked the common sense that taught me who to trust and who to avoid. Instead, he walked into everypony trying to make new friends. Even if both Delvio and I tried to teach him how to be cautious and patient, he disregarded our advices.”

“That’s why you killed him?”

“No. He had to be taken out of the picture because he had talked with the NER. He believed that becoming one with the Republic was the best option for the welfare of New Pegasus, and that is why I had no other choice.”

“Really? Couldn’t you just have had him discredited, or have revoked your decision?”

“My word is my biggest possession, I can’t take it back for no reason.” Novalis shook his head. “What sort of honor would I want to brandish if I just did and undid according to my petty desires?”

“It wouldn’t be so petty.” I shrugged. “Besides, if everypony knew that your grandson was a bit of a loose screw, why couldn’t you just correct him in public, leaving him discredited?”

“That would harm the Family.” Novalis stomped the floor, even if lightly, to make clear that he didn’t agree with that. “And harming the Family would be the worst I could ever do!”

“I see.” I lowered my head. “It seems like I only had a skewed view of the whole picture, and I am no one to judge your actions. Still, my offer stands, Novalis. I want you to live and survive this conflict, so that the population of New Pegasus can remember you as what you were and not what your children did of you.”

“No, I can’t be seen as a traitor. You are the enemy of my Family now, and the only reason why I came here is to admit our defeat and to expect a honorable death.”

“Honorable death? Did you come here for me to kill you?” I asked, awestruck. “I can’t do that, Novalis. There is no honor in that.”

“What honor is there in running away, then?”

“Urgh... Honor is a beautiful concept, but one must regard it with care. You don’t die honorably, Novalis. You just die, and that’s it. There is no dignity in death... maybe there can be purpose or intention, but never dignity or honor. Please, listen to me, let me spare your life and let me get you out of Neighvada. Maybe you can live peacefully beyond the Divide, or...”

“Please, Farsight, stop it. I really appreciate that you care for my life, but I have taken this decision after a long meditation, and I am not going to change it now.”

Novalis used his magic to lift a small pistol from the coat pocket, and before I could react, he put it beneath his muzzle. I knew what he was going to do, and I wanted to stop him from doing that, but somehow I couldn’t manage to move. Something inside me told me that I wouldn’t do any good for him by forcing him to live. I sighed and looked him in the eyes.

“Novalis, you don’t have to do this...”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Farsight.” Novalis mumbled. “This is what my honor commands me to do. Good luck, Farsight, and guide New Pegasus to a brighter future.”

**BANG!**

The bullet tore a hole in Novalis’ head but didn’t manage to exit the pony’s skull. The dead stallion shook and fell to one side, breaking his walking aid and staining the polished floor with blood. I felt terrible, even if Novalis had been an enemy and had tried to kill me. Was that the price of victory? Why did the ponies that I had a fondness for have to die in order for me to climb up the ladder?

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With a group of robot servants furiously scrubbing the blood and disposing of the corpse of the late Ferratura

patriarch, it was time to take the final step in the downfall of the enemy Family. With my armies in place keeping the remaining grunts locked in the Clops, I waited on the street for more forces to arrive. The robots could do simple tasks, such as keeping anypony from exiting the building, but in order to flush the rest out, we would need thinking ponies.

The suicide of Novalis had me surprisingly shaken. Honor in death, or so he said; but I could see no honor in putting a bullet in your skull just because you had been defeated. Death could have purpose or even a meaning, but honor? What sort of contorted traditions had the elderly Ferratura have invoked to justify his actions? I was giving him the chance to live in peace, but he refused it. There was no way of understanding that, at least from my point of view.

He couldn't be blamed of what Verrazano and Delvio had done. Both were adult ponies, with their own freedom and according responsibility. I could understand that he felt bitter for having seen his legacy torn to shreds by the incompetence of his kin, I could even have understood that he would have claimed for vengeance; but even with a motherload of fatherly love, there was no way of grasping his reaction: staying silent and taking a bullet for those who wrecked his work.

Even so, I didn't want it to get into my head. The dead were gone, but the living had to carry on struggling. I had put many chips on the table, so to speak, and I was one move away from collecting the profit. Folding now was the biggest mistake I could ever make.

"Farsight!" Rose was already waiting outside the Clops. "Over here!"

"Rose, what are you doing here?" I asked. "It's dangerous to go alone."

"Please, I know that you care about me, but you should already know that I'm perfectly capable of defending myself." Rose waved a hoof, acting confident. "Besides, it's been a long time since any of the Ferratura goons has actually tried to take a potshot out of a window. Your robots are doing a good job keeping them locked in."

"As long as they don't try to break out, this war is about to be over..."

"Farsight, you look shaken." Rose put a hoof on my leg. "What's wrong? You don't usually act like that."

"Novalis Ferratura was waiting for me at the Spire."

"Novalis?" Rose gasped. "How did he manage to...?"

"It turns he lived in a different building, far from the Clops." I laughed dimly. "That is how he walked around unnoticed."

"Unnoticed? I am sure that everypony in New Pegasus knew him."

"Yes, but take a look at how things have been lately. The fighting in the streets has kept the population inside their homes, and once it's finished, they have come out like crazy. A single pony can easily walk under the radar within a multitude."

"You've got your point there." Rose nodded. "What did he want? Did he attack you?"

"No, not at all." I waved a hoof. "His visit followed a completely different purpose. One could say he was looking to formally admit defeat."

"I would never have expected such a thing." Rose looked surprised. "Such an elegant and well-mannered behaviour is hard to believe considering how his sons have turned to be."

"Remember what Brass Badge told us? He said that Novalis was a true gentlecolt, something odd in the Wasteland, and that he took pride in keeping things that way. It turned out that the entire world was conspiring against him, so to speak."

"Conspiring, Farsight?" Rose laughed. "The only conspiracy here is yours."

"What I meant was that life chose to wreck all that he worked for. His sons were arrogant and didn't follow his noble ways; and his grandson was apparently too trusting to have a good future in New Pegasus."

“Sandmound? Brass Badge said he was as noble as his grandfather.”

“He seemed to lack common sense though. According to Novalis, Sandmound walked around befriending everypony, even those who would betray him at the first chance. That’s how he talked so openly with Full House and even with the Republic. Did you know that he had vouched for the integration in the Republic?”

“Who told you that?” Rose looked suspicious.

“Novalis did, and considering that he had nothing left to lose, I believe him.”

“Nothing to lose? In which sense?”

“Rose, Novalis committed suicide right before my eyes. He put a bullet in his brain.”

“What?” Rose looked at me with her eyes wide open. “Why would he do that?”

“He said that his honor demanded it. He had been defeated and he couldn’t just stay alive while watching his legacy burn to ashes. Before doing that, though, he wanted to know what kind of a leader I was going to be. That’s why he visited me.”

“And why didn’t you stop him?”

“What for?” I shook my head. “He didn’t want to live, who was I to keep him from doing what he wished for? Besides, Novalis was an old buck, he had a long and prosperous life.”

“That is true. It’s sad that it had to end that way, though.”

“I agree.” I sighed.

Rose and I looked at each other, then we turned our heads towards the Clops. The end of our journey was in there, waiting for us to grasp it. Still, I didn’t want to walk in there alone, since I didn’t know how many Ferraturas were holed up in the building; and frankly, I didn’t feel like getting shot again. How long would we have to wait until...

“Feeling impatient, huh, bro?” Nadyr came walking down the street surrounded by a group of armed ponies. “Sorry for the delay, we had to pile up some supplies before getting here. Besides, milady Von Ohm needs a lot of time to get ready.”

“Watch what you say, zebra.” Ampera’s distorted voice echoed in the street. She was standing on the back of the pack, her metal hulk shining over the rest of the ponies.

“No offence meant, ma’am.” Nadyr bowed exaggeratedly. “But you do need quite some time to fit into that big chunk of steel.”

“Patience is a virtue, Nadyr. Your friend seems to know that a lot better than you do.”

“Considering how you’re putting me through the test, I think that I’ll be a master in patience by the time we end this.” Nadyr laughed. “Should we get moving, then?”

“Of course.” I nodded. “Everypony ready?”

A raging ‘YES!’ echoed through the group and the sound of guns cocking filled the air. I smiled and readied my rifle. It was time to bring the battle to enemy territory, and I like how that felt. I really did.

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The large gambling hall had been turned into a chaos of bullets and explosions, with flipped tables acting as cover spots and Ferratura goons shooting at us from the upper levels, giving us quite a hard time to move forward. Some of our ponies had already fallen victim to enemy fire, and others had been wounded. Rose was already taking care of them, while I tried to pinpoint enemies for Ampera to take down. After all, her sheer superiority in firepower was our best way to progress.

“Enemy fire at the top floor, Farsight!” She roared. “Give me their positions!”

“Fifty three meters, at your three!” I yelled while ducking behind a table. “Take them out before they can destroy our covering spots!”

Time was of the essence, because most of the tables were splintered and broken, threatening to fall apart. That would leave us exposed to their attacks.

“Got it!” Ampera nodded and a burst of fire roared from her battle-saddle mounted miniguns. After that, three red spots disappeared from my E.F.S. and I dared to raise my head above the table.

“Nice destruction.” I smiled. “It’s going to take a lot of money to get this mended after we’re done.”

“You know that I’m not precisely subtle.” Ampera laughed dimly. “I can try to be more careful, though.”

“Don’t worry, Ampera. We need to get this solved, and then we’ll worry about how much it costs and how we’re going to repair it.”

“Whatever you say, Farsight. I’ve got my own stuff to fix.” Ampera tried to shrug but her thick armour only showed a small shift.

“Hey, bro!” Nadyr walked close to me while keeping an eye out for enemies. “What now?”

“First I want to see if the scouting parties we sent forward have found something. Then, we’ll set off for the office of the Ferraturas. I suppose that Delvio will be entrenched there.”

“Fair enough.” Ampera nodded, while Nadyr smiled. “If he hasn’t escaped, which I hope he has not been able to do, we will have him trapped there.”

“Sir!” one pony called from the other end of the room. “The restaurant area is clear. All Ferratura forces have been killed and the place is under our control!”

“Good. Any trace of Delvio?” I asked.

“No, sir. Only standard goons, we couldn’t capture anypony alive for questioning.”

“OK, that’s understandable.” I nodded. “I don’t expect them to simply surrender. Any news from the other team?”

“They should be coming soon. I heard them clear the brothel area...”

“Farsight, sir!” Another pony appeared through a doorway. “The brothel area has been secured. Many mares there, but no trace of any important Ferratura pony. Should we carry on the search?”

“No, no, there’s no need for that.” I waved a hoof. “Mares and gentlecolts, it’s time for the final assault!”

“HOO-RAH!” The crowd yelled.

It felt good to be on the lead, and now I had the sensation of being able to grasp power with my own hooves, as Delvio was about to be cornered and eliminated. As we walked down the corridor that led to the office where we assumed that the remaining Ferratura had to be entrenched, I prepared myself for a rough battle. An enemy that has nowhere to run will fight to the death, and that means trouble for the attacker.

“All right, everypony.” Ampera spoke through the armor. “Don’t try to be a hero, because this will definitely be ugly. We can expect heavy resistance as soon as we breach through the door, so keep your heads low and your rifles firing. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then at three, I’ll open the doors!” Ampera stood in front of the locked gates and got ready to buck them. I ducked, grabbed the rifle tightly and breathed deep.

“One...”

Silence became tense and tough, as the many ponies that formed our group got ready to face a large crossfire. Some mumbled silent prayers, some checked their weapons, some just whistled a tune. The common trait was that we were all really nervous; although who wouldn’t be in such a circumstance?

“Two...” Ampera got ready to buck.

I breathed deep and got ready for what was coming: death or glory, it was as simple as that. Success would

mean the end of my plans for good, letting me obtain absolute control of the city. Failure implied my death and destruction, so the stakes were fairly clear. There was no room for middle ground here, and that made my determination even stronger. If I had survived up to that point, I would live to see another day and to reap what I had sown.

“THREE!” Ampera roared and bucked.

...

Silence. I blinked twice and looked at my E.F.S., that simply didn't show any enemy dots in the close range; neither did it in the long range. The place was empty, plain and simple. We walked cautiously, looking for hidden traps such as tripwires or rigged shotguns, as it could easily be the place for an ambush, but there was nothing. It looked as if there would never have been a single pony in that room for a long time.

“Where is everypony?” Nadyr asked. “Where is Delvio and his guard?”

“The scans show nothing here.” Ampera groaned. “I don't usually trust them in closed spaces, but this time they seem to be right.”

“Group A, scout ahead!” I ordered. “Group B, search the room for hidden compartments! Delvio can't have bypassed our blockade.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Farsight, take a look at this!” Rose called me from the large table in the middle of the room.

“What is it?!” I galloped towards her.

“I think that is the answer to your questions.”

I looked at what Rose was showing me. A small piece of paper was lying on the table, hastily scribbled and left as a witness of a quick runaway. I read it up and down and emitted a groan of dismay, and stomped the floor harshly.

“What's going on, Farsight?” Ampera asked.

“This is what's wrong.” I replied, and began to read the note.

*Farsight,*

*I am certain that it's you who's behind all the attacks. Ever since you appeared with your pretended 'confession' I knew that you would be the one that would bring us down. Verrazano wanted to kill you on sight, but I convinced him to let Full House do the job. Of course, we sent those three mercenaries to kill you, but they were lousy on purpose. What I could never count on was on you getting the upper hoof against House and turning his armies against us. Now I'm forced to make a run for it, or I'll lose my life; but keep my name in mind. I never forget, and I damn sure never forgive.*

*Delvio Ferratura*

“He's gone?” Nadyr gasped. “How?”

“Sir, we found a small passageway that led to the a sewage tunnel!” One of the ponies of the group A came galloping from the back end of the room. “It has been demolished recently, though.”

“That means we can't follow him.” Ampera shook her head.

“Where can he be now?” Rose asked.

“Most probably, he'll be galloping away in the Wasteland.” I groaned.

“Are you going after him?” Nadyr wanted to jump onto more action.

“No, as much as I'd love to, it would be a waste of time and ponypower. He'll still be a marked target inside the walls, but for now, I think it's better to focus on other things.”

“Things such as?” Ampera asked.

“Such as claiming my throne.” I grinned. “My friends! My brothers! The battle is over, and we are victorious! Come with me, and let’s celebrate this day as a time of change, a time of improvement, a time for the common Wastelander to stand proud as a member of a welcoming community. Who is with me?”

The ponies that had come with me all the way pranced and roared, rejoicing in the fact that they were alive. Soon, they would rejoice much more.

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The stand had been built in a flash, showing the prowess and the good functioning of the New Pegasus citizens. Microphones had been installed, lighting had been diverted towards the speaker’s position, and garlands and flags with the red eye over a blue background had been displayed along the Strip. Population was already crowding at the street when I arrived to the backstage.

Ampera and Dee had put ponies at every rooftop to avoid a possible sneak attack like the one that took Stuka’s life away in the Wedding at Freedom Field, while my robots patrolled the streets thoroughly and checked each pony for concealed weapons. Nothing had to fail this time. Nothing at all.

I walked up the staircase and looked at the cheering audience, who knew thanks to the radio that the war was over and the NER was no more a menace, all thanks to a certain unknown pony called Farsight who had masterfully outclassed both Full House and the Ferratura Family, and now stood alone in the pinnacle of power of New Pegasus. I had to admit that my ego was swelling at the moment, but then again, why should I be humble when I was on the very highest possible point?

“Mares and gentlecolts!” I saluted valiantly, and was responded by a raging cheer from the audience. “Fellow citizens of New Pegasus and Freedom Field, my friends, my colleagues... I come before you today to show myself at you, to show that my hooves are clean and that I am here for the good of this city that we take pride on calling our home!”

Another cheer interrupted me, but I smiled and let it die down.

“Yes, I am here to guide New Pegasus through these dire times! The past leaders have proven to be weak and selfish, unable to handle their foalish quarrels when a larger and far more dreadful menace was looming out there! And believe me, I am not talking about the raiders or the ghouls, I am talking about a far more dangerous and present reality, the New Equestrian Republic!”

The audience booed at the mention of the NER.

“Now, now, let’s analyze the situation calmly. The Republic came here with words of goodwill and friendship, and I welcome that! No pony has enough friends in this world, provided those friends can be trusted, of course! The Republic has secured Neighvada and allows the traders to move to and fro, bringing us fine goods and letting our economy prosper! However, they have also shown us their darker side... Not so long ago, I was facing President Praline of the NER, who had come here to occupy the city in the name of peace enforcement, and I say no to that! We are masters of our own destiny! Our souls are only ours to command, and no Republic will tell us what to do! I will be willing to listen to any proposal, but the final decision has to be of the City of New Pegasus!”

The crowd went crazy once again.

“Now, my goal is to see a united New Pegasus and to make it grow beyond its borders, reclaiming the territory that was lost after the War! The Wasteland will be dominated, and the population of New Pegasus will be free to choose its destiny! In order to do that, my first decision has been to demolish the wall of shame that separated New Pegasus from Freedom Field, and welcome its leaders to join me in the City Board! One New Pegasus, strong and united, will stand the test of time! And we will make it...  
**TOGETHER!!!**”

My final statement was the detonator of a flailing wave of cheers and screams of joy. My name echoed up and down the Strip, and I swear that I had the feeling that every pony in the Wasteland would be hearing it at the moment. After all that suffering, after all the pain and effort we had been through, despite all the losses, I felt true happiness. The game was over, and I was the winner. I closed my eyes and took a step back with a

broad smile on my face... I was definitely going to enjoy that moment.

#

Note: Reputation Change

City of New Pegasus: Adored. You are the savior of the city, the pony that has brought them peace and a bright future. Enjoy the moment but be careful about what you do next.

New Equestrian Republic: Not trusted. You have become a present threat for the Republic, and some of your choices are regarded with caution by the rulers of the faction. Expect anything from them.

Ferratura Family: Sworn enemy. The last remains of the family have fled but have sworn to return. Keep an eye out.

**END OF ACT IV**

## ***ACT V: DUSK***

## ***Chapter 19: Send Me An Angel***

*“Good evening, mares and gentlecolts, and welcome to another entire hour of music and entertainment at the station that brings you all you need to make your way through the day! Yes, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus! This last piece is recent, and yet, it has become an instant classic; it’s the faceoff between Swinging Voice and Dino Maretino at the Grand Auditorium! These two crooners are talent ponyfied, and I am surprised that they haven’t yet been summoned away from our city; I guess that the regular audience that fills their shows is a powerful anchor, don’t you think?”*

*Let’s move on to the news, but first, let me make an important announcement, or so it is for me, at least. Today is my last day speaking to you through the waves, bringing you the news and the entertainment. I have gotten old and it’s become time for me to move on in order to make way for younger and readier voices, such as the one of your upcoming host, Miss New Pegasus. I have had a wonderful time with a magnificent team that has allowed me to make a job out of my passion. I’ve been many years behind this microphone, and I’ve seen quite a lot of things happen, but the best memory I will ever take with me is that of having been able to share them with all of you. Thanks from the depths of my heart.*

*Now, back to the news. The City’s industrial district of Sunset Hills is now working at full speed after the protocolary inauguration hosted by the Spokespony of the City Board, Desert Rose and the Chief of Development of New Pegasus, Ampera Von Ohm. The speech of the surprisingly young and equally capable mare focused on the need for progress in dire times like the ones we live in. Our industry, she said, is what will make us able to maintain our independence and our comparative advantage against incoming forces like those of the New Equestrian Republic, and our welfare, she added, is what keeps making Wastelanders come and join the community.*

*Looking back at how the City has grown in the last few years, I must admit I am frankly surprised at how proficiently this administration has managed to assign the scarce resources in order to optimize the welfare of the citizens. The industrial areas have been rebuilt, many housing projects have come to fruition and the overall level of the urban environment is more similar to those old Pre-War pictures than to the Wasteland. Even with the presence of the Republic, New Pegasus has thrived like it hadn’t in decades.*

*Speaking of the Republic, grim news arrive from the Coltorado front, mares and gentlecolts. It seems like the forces of the Tsardom have managed to break NER lines and have prompted a strategic retreat into Neighvada. According to official statements, the Republican Army is standing guard at the far side of Hooper Dam and is ready to resist and hold the facility until a counteroffensive can be arranged. Despite all the trouble they have been through, the NER High Command states that the morale of its soldiers remains high and that they believe that their technological superiority will be the key for a long-run victory.*

*The following question is... what is this Tsardom that has forced the once victorious armies of the New Equestrian Republic to fall back from as far as Hayowa to Neighvada? Who leads them, and what is their purpose? What will happen to the City of New Pegasus if the Republic is flushed out of the Territory, and how will the City Board react to a possible Tsardom takeover? So far, none of these questions have found a valid answer, but this station will keep posing them until we can get the information we all are searching for.*

*For now, let’s stop it there, and move on to some more music! This is a piece I hold dear, for it’s one of those that marks an age, in this case, the rebirth of the world after the fall of ponykind. Yes, I am getting sentimental, but it’s my last day on air, so cut me some slack. For all of you to enjoy, here is some Velvet Remedy, and remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Mister New Pegasus, speaking, this time more than ever, directly to your souls...”*

*“Are you ready for the interview, mister Farsight?” The young mare smiled and looked at me in the eyes.*

*“Of course.” I nodded. “Ask away.”*

The mare gave me a kind grin and began searching through her papers, while I looked calmly at her. She was fairly young, but considering that she was going to be the new anchorpony of the local radio station, that

mare had to be a good journalist; or at least she had to possess the tenacity to pry the information out of the ponies she interviewed. She had a natural charm, although she wasn't amazingly beautiful. She was cute, petite and dressed discretely; but there was something that made you like her and feel compelled to spill your guts. It could be her hazel eyes and her orange fur, or it could be her gracious way of moving around, but there sure was something disarming about her.

Still, I had tried to avoid giving an interview for a very long time, because I feared that too much public presence might turn my rule into a cult of my personality, and frankly, I didn't like the idea too much. First of all, there were ponies around me whose help had been critical for my success, and reducing them to mere sideshows would be offensive, to say the least. There were many enemies looming around outside, I didn't want to make more at home. Secondly, being the governor of a booming city such as New Pegasus required quite an effort and left little time to faff about in things such as interviews. However, Dee and Rose had already been interviewed by that mare, so keeping to the shadows was beginning to feel odd and antisocial.

"We're ready to go, mister Farsight."

"Call me Farsight, please. Avoid the 'mister', it makes me feel uncomfortable."

The mare put a little holotape recording device on the table, a small piece of Pre-War arcano-technology that had kept on functioning by Celestia knows what reason. She ordered the heap of papers and moved to a comfortable position, while I took a final glance out of my office window and smiled, enjoying the view of a lit-up city that grew ever bigger. With a deep sigh of satisfaction, I looked back at the mare and got ready to answer.

"Perfect. Good evening to our dear listeners, this is Miss New Pegasus with another interview to an important pony in town. This time, I am here at the top of the Horseshoe Spire with a certain blue stallion some of you might know. Farsight, good evening, and welcome to New Pegasus Radio. It's great to have you here."

"Thank you." I replied. "I really appreciate the job New Pegasus Radio does to deliver information to all four corners of Neighvada."

"Thanks for the compliment." Miss New Pegasus laughed clearly. "Tell me, Farsight, how is your daily life nowadays?"

"My daily life? I guess it has become something of a routine. After all, governing a town is not as glamorous as one might think. Meetings that last almost all day, having to balance income and expenditure, dealing with the delegation of the NER... Usually, every day is nothing more than a combination of these factors, in a different order and proportion."

"I understand. However, every now and then there is something special, isn't it? For example, yesterday your fellow members of the City Board inaugurated the industrial district of Sunset Hills, am I right?"

"Most certainly." I nodded. "Naturally, there are milestones that mark our path, but such an event like the one that took place yesterday has required almost three years of hard work and planning. It was a day to celebrate, but we should keep in mind that nothing would have been a reality if we hadn't planned it with enough foresight."

"Speaking of planning and celebrating... Today is the eighth anniversary of your rise to power, with that famous speech that started a wave of changes throughout the city. How do you remember that day?"

"Whew, it was like seeing a floodgate open." I sighed. "All the effort and hard work I had put on the table until that day finally paid off. It was a bit of a self-appreciation moment, a tad egotistic if you ask me. Still, I had to face the people and tell them that we were there to guide them to a better future."

"Did you expect such a warm reaction?"

"Honestly, I had no idea. However, looking at it with hindsight, I realize that what happened was the most probable outcome. After all, we had shoed the NER away from our gates and had ended the senseless battle between the Ferratura Family and Full House. The population was craving for somepony to come and set things straight once and for all, and that was what we were offering. For now, we are fulfilling that promise."

“Then, your first decision was risky. You decided to break down the wall between Freedom Field and New Pegasus.”

“Yes, that was a promise of old.” I smiled calmly. “I come from Freedom Field, you know, and I’ve seen how life was out there when the barriers stood. There was so much potential in everything, in the ponies, in the businesses, in the infrastructure... However, it was there, lying underutilized, simply because some elements were ‘unwelcome’ for the society in New Pegasus. Things could easily have been solved by implementing a proper law enforcement and letting the good ponies deal with the bad ponies. That’s what happened, mostly, when Dee took over the control of Freedom Field, and then, I just made the symbolic choice of tearing down the walls.”

“And how was the reaction to such a decision?”

“It depends on who you ask, I guess. Obviously, the district of Freedom Field experienced an incredible boom in living quality, so the ponies living there were happy as a foal in Hearth Warming’s Day. Naturally, New Pegasus had to cope with the increase in needs of its poorer citizens, so there might have been some inhabitants who might have taken it badly. However, with time and proper management, we have achieved a certain equality between districts and I can say with an acceptable level of certainty that the population is happy with the reunion.”

“Besides, that has allowed the Strip to become almost twice as long as it was before; and the square where the gates stood is a meeting point for everypony in town.”

“You mean Union Square? Yes, that is something I take great pride of.” I couldn’t help to smile and take a quick look down the window. “That place had a certain symbolic value... it was a checkpoint of separation, a wall of shame. We needed to turn that into a memento of reunion and friendship, something quite lacking these days. That’s why we chose to rebuild the area as a public square and add a celebratory monument.”

“You mean the Obelisk?”

“Exactly.”

“May I ask you a personal question? Who are the ponies depicted on the Obelisk? And why a griffin on top?”

“It’s a reminder of those who fell during the conflicts that turned New Pegasus into what it is now. Folks whose contribution was necessary to understand what we are today.”

“And those are?”

“Well, you have Metronome, second in command of Dee Cleff, who helped organize the city of Freedom Field. Then there’s LaRoche and Snake Eater, faithful associates of Saddle Buckmare and Ampera Von Ohm, who died defending the population of New Pegasus and Freedom Field when the war started. Then, there’s Novalis Ferratura. Most of the progress that the city experienced in the past decades was his doing and his legacy, so it was fair to have him depicted there.”

“And the griffin?” Miss New Pegasus looked at me with an inquiring face. I tried to hide my feelings that, even if dimmed, were still there.

“That was Stuka Talonblade. She was originally a Talon mercenary, but life brought her to Freedom Field. She died when Golden Swallow tried to take over the city, the day of Dee Cleff’s wedding.”

“Yes, I remember that day.” The mare nodded. “Speaking of Dee Cleff and her husband, could you give me the inside scoop to her life?”

“I think you should ask her about that.” I shook my head. “She’s very careful about her privacy.”

“Fine, fine.” Miss New Pegasus smiled. “We’ll leave that for another show. The city has experimented a substantial growth over the years, how do you feel about it?”

“I think of it as a job well done.” I laughed. “This city couldn’t stand in stagnation anymore. The Wasteland has changed, and organized forces have substituted the chaos of before. Therefore, having a minimal security and some basic trading posts isn’t enough to endure in a world that is becoming more and more competitive.

We needed to become strong on our own, and that is what we did.”

“That must have taken a lot of funding.”

“It has, obviously, but we found out that both Full House and the Ferraturas had managed to amass a significant amount of wealth; which we used to fund the development of industrial areas and housing projects.” I lied, since all those projects had been paid with the gold we had brought from Neighorleans. “Those improvements have helped the city to progress and we expect to see a return of investment pretty soon.”

“Speaking of facilities, another tough time was the recovery of Macintosh Airport for the City.”

“Most certainly. It wasn’t easy, since the New Equestrian Republic has shown to be pretty clingy when it comes to territories and properties. I had to lead a tough negotiation with Vice-President Heartstrings, but in the end we managed to find a satisfactory solution.”

“Which were the terms?”

“We paid a steep bill, but that was all.” Another lie. I had been Harpsong’s sex toy for a night in exchange for the Airport. Not that I disliked it, though.

“I see. How are relationships with the NER now, if I may ask?”

“We get along.” I waved a hoof. “After all, the Republic has much bigger problems to deal with than the ramblings of a single city in the middle of the desert. We have our cooperation agreements, and our meetings are always cordial, but that’s it. We don’t want more involvement.”

“Speaking of bigger problems, I suppose you mean the Tsardom.”

“Sadly, yes.”

“What do you know about this mysterious force?”

“Not much more than you, I’m afraid.” I shook my head. “We’re evaluating the risks it means to the well-being of our community, and I assure you that we’ll act consequently. Sadly, we don’t know if the current war between the Republic and the Tsardom was prompted by an attack of the NER or by the expansive behaviour of the Tsar. Still, the rumours make us think that the second option is the most probable one.”

“What do you intend to do about a possible invasion?”

“I can’t really answer to that question.” I shrugged. “There are many variables involved that may change what the optimal strategy is.”

“I understand.”

“Let me assure you, though, that the main priority of this government will be to preserve the safety and welfare of the Citizens of New Pegasus.”

“No doubt about that.” Miss New Pegasus smiled professionally. “One last question, what are the next plans for the City Board?”

“Our working line keeps being that of developing the city’s infrastructure, industry and trade in order to boost the economy of the local enterprises. However, the proximity of an armed conflict will surely make us reconsider what to devote our efforts to. I am sorry that I can’t be more precise, but this is a rather unstable moment in our recent history. We will have to wait and see what happens.”

“That is fairly logical. Well, Farsight, it has been a pleasure for me to spend this time chatting with you and knowing more about the status of the city and its government. This has been an interview by Miss New Pegasus for your favorite station, New Pegasus Radio!”

The mare fiddled with the recorder and put it back into her saddlebag, then she picked the papers and packed them together.

“Thanks for your time, Farsight.” She nodded and smiled. “There’s no need for you to move, I can find my way out. You know, I’ve heard rumours about you... they say you are a total ladykiller, and frankly, I am not

interested. Goodbye.”

She turned around and left hastily, as if she thought that I was going to keep her hostage or something similar. When the elevator beeped signalling that it was descending, I laughed out loud at the absurdity of the entire situation.

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The last words of the mare left me thinking, though, even if they had been a little ridiculous. It was true that being a single stallion in a place of power had made me attractive to the opposite sex, but I hadn't found any suitable companion in the last eight years. I had met many mares who had tried their luck with me, and I'll be very honest, I had shared a bed with most of them; but I hadn't met a single one who wasn't there for money. All kinds of female ponies had tried to become my soulmate, from high-class New Pegasus citizens to lowborn Wastelanders who believed that their beauty or sympathy would make me choose them from the lot.

I don't know why, but I didn't find any that managed to spark any feelings in me. Some were beautiful, some were true goddesses in flesh, some others were funny or great conversation partners, but none of them was able to hit the spot that turned a mare into that special mare. I can't say if I was clinging to the memories of Stuka or if I just saw through them and only found greed; but at one point I would always find an elegant way to forget about them and carry on alone.

One thing was certain, and that was that both Rose and Nadyr were worried about my situation. They would tell me again and again that I needed to find somepony to share my life with, that being lonely was going to eat me from the inside out, and that I spent too much time in my office looking at graphs, maps and tables. That there was more life beyond work, and that I had to try and enjoy what I had obtained. Then again, what could I do besides focusing on the city? Nadyr had his family, Rose was young and enjoyed the nightlife... me, on the other hoof, felt nothing special about anything else than my job.

I sighed and walked towards the computer, and began with my routinely check of the city. The last trade briefing showed an increase in off-Neighvada goods demand, and a new phenomenon was starting to pop up: tourism. Rich ponies of the other side of the Divide were starting to arrange caravans to come and gamble in New Pegasus. I began to think on ways of profiting from that demand, when the elevator beeped. I had installed a password-encrypted security system and had put a guard close to the terminal, to ensure that only those welcomed ponies were able to get into my office. In any case, I always had a small pistol nearby.

“I knew you'd be here, bro!” Nadyr yelled as a salute.

I turned around from the computer and saw my companion walk out of the elevator cabin, surrounded by a foal and a filly, both black with white curly manes. He was already becoming strong and heavy, and his red eyes glowed with avidity. She, on the other hoof, was thin and skinny but agile, and her green eyes showed a calm and kind spirit. With all their differences, they kept being twins, and like twins they behaved: resonating.

“Hi, uncle Farsight!” They screamed in unison.

“Woah, you two, keep it down!” Nadyr laughed.

“Don't worry Nadyr.” I smiled. “It's not like I'm going to be scared by a loud noise. Hi there, you two! How's it going?”

“Awesome!” The young colt pranced. “Papa let me shoot a gun for the first time, and it was incredible!”

“Was it? How many targets did you hit, Harko?”

“Six out of seven!” Harko Cleff boasted. “Not bad for a first day, right?”

“Not bad at all!” I patted Harko on the head and turned my eyes to the young filly. She reminded me of Rose when I first met her. “How was your day, Atreid?”

Atreid Cleff sighed and looked around, seemingly tired.

“Not as good as Harko's. What is it with you and guns? We are civilized ponies, and we still go like crazy

when it comes to shooting!”

“Atreid, you should understand that this has always been a Wasteland, and that self-defense has been key to survival. Yes, we are trying to become civilized, but until we achieve that status of civilization we must be careful and not forget where we come from. For example, your father has taught me how to fight using my metal hindlegs. Still, if you prefer, you can stay with me and help me with the numbers.”

“All right.” Atreid hissed. “You’ve made your point clear. I’ll just go outside and take a long walk.”

“Atreid, please.” Nadyr groaned. “Don’t make such a fuss, would you? Uncle Farsight is just trying to be nice with you.”

“Fine, fine…” Atreid looked at me and tried to smile. “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing to forgive.” I smiled back. “Now why don’t you two get comfortable over there? I need to discuss something with your father.”

“OK!” Both Atreid and Harko nodded and darted towards the living room.

“Teaching them to behave is being more painful than fighting a horde of Cazadorables.” Nadyr shook and puffed.

“It’s the age, I guess.” I shrugged. “You seem to be getting along quite well with Harko.”

“Mostly because we’re both male, and we like the same things. Although Harko seems to get quite a kick from shooting and overall destruction… and that worries me.”

“Keep an eye on him, but be patient. He’s just a colt. How about Atreid? Is she more fond of her mother?”

“I think their relationship has become a bit tense.” Nadyr sighed. “Dee is very strict and I believe that Atreid is one of those ponies that marches to her own drum.”

“I can sense the personalities clashing.” I laughed. “Maybe Rose should talk to her… a lower age difference can be what bridges them together.”

“Good thinking, bro. I’ll ask Rose to help me out with Atreid.” Nadyr gave me a pat on the back. “Now, what was that you wanted to talk about?”

“Well, there are some interesting data in the last trade briefing that… wait a second, what is this?”

I brought forth a prompt that had begun ticking in the computer screen. It was a radio network monitoring system, similar to the one I had seen in the Relay Wave station eight years ago. It had been always there, locating the different emitters and pinpointing where they were broadcasting from, as well as giving me a measure of the activity. One of the signals was supposed to be sent from above or below New Pegasus, but it had always been a very subtle signal that only transmitted a seemingly random clicking and clacking. It had made me suspicious before, but I had never paid too much attention to it.

At the moment, however, the signal’s intensity had boomed and activity was bubbling on the frequency, with a torrent of clicks and clacks flooding the waves. Whatever that signal was, it meant that something was going on either above or below us; and we needed to find out before it meant trouble for the city.

“That is some sort of radio signal…” Nadyr mumbled.

“It’s always been there, but it has shown no trace of activity in the last years. Only a basic pattern over static, so I thought it could be an automated system sending something like a distress signal that had never been turned off. However, this burst of data means that there is something else.”

“Where are they located?”

“Above or below the city. I have only a 2D representation, so the dot says it’s right on the middle of the Strip, and we both know that it can’t be.”

“Yes, but what could be below us… or above us?”

“I know about the Stable beneath New Pegasus, but I can tell you for certain that they had no broadcasting

equipment. About what lies above, well... We don't know what is beyond the cloud cover, but what could there actually be?"

"Nothing, probably..." Nadyr scratched his beard.

"Papa, uncle Farsight!" Harko called from the window. "Look up there!"

Nadyr's son was pointing towards the cloud cover, where something was indeed happening. An unidentified object was falling from the skies at high speed, while other objects had begun a chase but were leaving it to fall to the ground. The radio of my PipBuck beeped and a guard's voice could be heard over the noise of the streets.

"Farsight, sir, an unidentified flying body has been spotted directed towards us!"

"I know, I'm seeing it right now! Do you have a clear visual of it?"

"It's still too far to make out what it is, sir, but it doesn't appear to be too large! What are your orders?"

"Estimate the impact zone and clear it; also, keep me in the loop. I want to know what we are facing exactly."

"Yes, sir!"

The radio faded to static and I turned my head to Nadyr. The half-zebra nodded and called Atreid and Harko to join us, while I pushed the button of the elevator.

"You two should get ready." I warned the young ones. "This might get rough."

"Don't worry about us, uncle Farsight!" Harko smiled.

I nodded and pressed the elevator button, and while the cabin darted downward, I began to wonder what could be that strange object falling from the clouds. As far as we knew, there was nothing more beyond the clouds than the open sky. Of course, everypony knew that after Cloudsdale was destroyed in the War the pegasi decided to lock themselves beyond the cover, but there had been no trace of pegasi in New Pegasus in a long time. The cabin braked and the doors opened at the lower floor, and as soon as we got out of the elevator and the radio recovered reception, the voice of the guard called again.

"Farsight, sir, are you there?"

"Yes, yes, I was in the elevator. What is it?"

"The approximate landing zone is clear. We calculate that the object should reach the ground at Union Square."

"Any idea of what the object is?"

"We're still not sure, sir, but it looks like a pegasus in power armor!"

"A pegasus?"

"Yes, sir! We can't really tell, because it moves quite fast, but it does look like a pony with wings. Do we attempt to shoot it down?"

"Is it falling freely?"

"Yes, it appears to be plummeting without control. Do we intercept?"

"No, let it fall to the ground, unless it tries something funny." I warned. "Be careful, I would like to capture it alive. If there are actual pegasi up there, I need to know their intentions towards us."

"Understood, sir! Over and out!"

We trotted out of the Casino and headed down the Strip towards Union Square. The entire city had suffered a transformation in the time of our government, with many buildings being recovered for both housing and economic purposes. When the Ferraturas were in charge, the city life gravitated around the Strip and only a few small cross-streets were worth treading. The rest were nothing more than dirty gutters where nothing ever happened. After our rise to power, the population had expanded and had filled the buildings that were

abandoned, turning them into their homes, and the streets had been cleaned. Shops and small businesses had begun to locate themselves in the formerly forsaken side streets of New Pegasus, and now the Strip was less of an only way through and more of a boulevard for ponies to enjoy walking up and down.

“Look!” Atreid shrieked. “It’s about to land!”

Mesmerized as I was by my thoughts, I hadn’t seen the object that was falling from the skies reach the ground. I only caught a glimpse of a black body with white wings plummeting down and the sound of metal smashing against concrete filled the air. Atreid let go a loud gasp and we galloped the remaining path until the crash site. The loud noise had attracted some ponies, but the city guards were already doing a fine job keeping the crowds away from the square.

“Farsight, sir!” The guard saluted. “Welcome! Nadyr, young ones, welcome too!”

“Rest now. What was it?”

“It’s a pegasus, heavily armored.” The guard thought about what to say. “Not an armor like anything we had seen before, though.”

“Is he alive?”

“It’s a mare, sir, and she is alive. Severely wounded, but alive.”

“May I take a look?”

“Certainly, sir!”

The guard walked to one side and I saw the body of a medium-sized mare clad in a sleek black power armor, that resembled the chitinous exoskeleton of a radscorpion. She had landed headfirst and was lying on her back, with one wing crushed under her body. The helmet had broken and revealed the face of a white mare with blue and red mane, trendily cut and combed to one side. Even if stained with blood, I swear to Celestia that I had never seen a face more beautiful than that. The proportions were perfect, the shape of the muzzle was soft and rounded, and the white fur gleamed like a diamond.

Even if I was no physician, it was obvious that the pegasus was heavily wounded, but she kept breathing dimly. I tried to force my brain to think a way of getting her to an inconspicuous place where we could heal her and interrogate her, but I was completely dumbfounded by her sight. I kept glaring at her armored body, which, even if covered in ornate black and gold plating, was flowy and curvy in a way that no painter of old could have imagined. It looked as if it had been modeled by the wind, eroded out of a stone, taking out the unnecessary bits and leaving only beauty behind.

“Sir, what are we supposed to do with the pegasus?” The head guard stood in front of me. “Should we take her under custody or...”

“No.” I replied quickly. “I’ll deal with her.”

“Understood, sir.” The guard saluted.

“Deal with her?” Nadyr came trotting from behind. “How are you going to deal with her exactly?”

“Well, to begin with, we’re taking her back to the Spire.” I said. “I want to interrogate her personally.”

“The way you looked at her, bro...” Nadyr shook his head. “Frankly, I have the feeling that interrogating her is the last priority in your list.”

“I admit that she’s... breathtaking.” I sighed. “Still, I can’t let that cloud my mind. For our own good, I simply can’t.”

“You’ve got your principles right, that’s for certain.” Nadyr smiled. “Come, I’ll help you out.”

I lifted the body of the pegasus using my magic, just to find out that she was far lighter than expected. Somehow, I believed that the armor she was wearing had to be heavy, but to my surprise, it was nimble and easy to handle. With some effort, I managed to lay the body of the unconscious mare on my companion’s back, who huffed when he felt the weight, but was able to cope with it and move.

“She’s not as heavy as I thought.” Nadyr smiled. “OK, let’s move.”

“Atreid, Harko!” I called. “We return to the Spire! Bring Rose and Ampera with you, please!”

“Understood, uncle Farsight!” The two Cleffs darted downstreet while we turned around and began our march to my headquarters.

“Bro...” Nadyr asked. “What do you think about this?”

“About the pegasus?” I flicked my ears. “Frankly, I am worried. It’s not the sudden appearance of a winged pony, let’s not forget that strange radio signal.”

“But it’s always been there, isn’t it?”

“I know. However, it went absolutely crazy the moment before this very mare fell from the skies. That tells me that there has to be activity above us.”

“Aren’t you jumping into conclusions too quickly?” Nadyr smiled.

“How can you say that?” I replied. “First you have an outburst of activity on a radio emitter right above town, and the moment after a pegasus falls from the clouds. What other conclusion could there be?”

“First of all, we have no idea of what the pegasi might have built over the clouds. Still, don’t you think that if they had been literally on top of us they would have been able to keep unnoticed for so long? Honestly, I seriously doubt it.”

“You’ve got your point, but what about the radio signal?”

“I guess it could be a repeater system, that’s all. The fact that you’re picking the signal up there doesn’t mean that it has to be broadcasted from that very place.”

“All right, you might have your point there.” I shook my head. “How do you explain the pegasus, then?”

“We don’t know what was happening before she fell. Maybe the activity we heard was a distress signal sent by her.”

“That could be.” I nodded. “Yes, that would be a simple explanation. Still, a distress signal because of what? Who or what could be putting her in danger?”

“I think the only one capable of answering that is our sleeping princess here.” Nadyr sighed.

“Yes, you are right.” I shrugged and huffed. “That being the case, let’s hurry and return to the Spire.”

“Following you, bro!”

I doubled the pace towards our base, with my head entangled in theories about where the downed pegasus had come from and which were her allegiances and interests above New Pegasus. One thing was certain: she was wearing a type of armor that proved that she was no Wastelander. The plate she was carrying had been carefully crafted and had engravings of what looked like pure gold, something fairly odd to find in the wastes (unless one knew where to look); besides, there was almost no trace of dust or grit on her, which meant that she hadn’t been in dirty environments such as ones we lived in.

Besides, I had noticed a certain resemblance between the gear of the pegasus and Ampera’s T-66B Champion Armor, that being the reason why I had summoned her to the Spire. The pegasus was wearing a sleeker attire, more agile and aerodynamic, but I had the feeling that there were a reasonable number of similarities between the two to ask. I had witnessed what the ex-Ranger was capable of doing with such a suit of armor, so I was dying to know what the capabilities of the pegasus were... in case we had to face an attack from above.

Things didn’t look easy for us, considering how close we were from the actual frontlines. The Tsardom had appeared in the East simply out of nowhere, and somehow it had managed to push forward with an unstoppable force, driving the formerly victorious armies of the NER right back into our backyard. I had been carefully assembling an army of roboponies, improved versions of those of Full House, in order to defend the city from an attack by the Republic because, in the end, I was certain that the New Equestrian

Government would try to capture the city rather than pillage it or burn it down to ashes. With the Tsar's armies looming around, the chances of getting caught in a crossfire were fairly worrisome, and no contingent of robots would be able to withstand the clash of two nations.

Now, the chance of a third faction coming in from above was a true nightmare. Who they were and what they were up to was a complete mystery, and our only lead was the pegasus who Nadyr was carrying on his back. If we didn't manage to get the information we needed from her, we would be blind against a possible menace. Then again, if my companion was right, that menace could be only in my mind.

We walked into the elevator in a tense silence. I was too absorbed in my own thoughts, and Nadyr was starting to feel tired of carrying the unconscious pegasus. The trip was quick, as usual, and soon enough our unwelcomed guest was lying on my bed. I stood before her, looking at the shape of her body and at her angel-like face, while a strange feeling was beginning to grasp me from the inside.

"I'm done here." Nadyr sighed. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to the lounge to get myself a long drink."

"Sure, go ahead..." I replied absentmindedly.

What was that odd sensation in me? The pegasus made my body react in a way that no mare had done before... only with Stuka had I felt that way. However, Stuka made me feel good because of her warm heart and her kind feelings... it was true that it had begun as a sex-only relationship, but she had managed to get into my depths. For eight years, I had missed her, and I had tried to find in other mares a replacement for the void she left in me. Could this be the one?

I shook my head, reminding myself that I had to keep cool. I felt something different for that mare, that was undeniable, but I had no reason to expect her to feel the same way about me. Besides, there were other things to worry about, such as who she was, where she came from and what she was doing in our city. Once that was sorted out, I may be able to try and get to know her a little deeper.

"Bro, are you alright?" Nadyr had entered the room and stood beside me with a worried face. "You've been standing here ever since we arrived."

"Uh... yes." I nodded. "Yes, I'm fine, don't worry. It's just that..."

"You're worried? I know, but judging from the way you were looking at that mare, I think that your mind was at a different stage."

"Wha-?"

"Look, Farsight, I won't judge you." Nadyr gave me an almost fatherly pat on the back. "I know what you've been through, and I know how you miss her. For that matter, I am glad that you might have found somepony that really manages to fill that gap in you."

"Yes, but-"

"If you really love her, I say you go for her like there's no tomorrow." Nadyr smiled. "I'll back you up in whatever you may need, bro. However, don't forget who you are and what you're working for. The last thing we need now is a faux-pas surrounded by so many enemies. Hell, even I know that!"

I laughed. Nadyr had said the right words at the right time. He could be blunt and rough, but he was a true friend. I smiled at him and nodded in gratitude.

"Thank you so much, Nadyr. I really appreciate having you nearby."

"You're welcome, bro."

The elevator bell chimed, echoing through all the Spire, and the metal doors slid open in the distance.

"Farsight? Nadyr?" Rose's voice echoed on the room. "Are you here?"

"In the bedroom!" I called. "The guest is lying here."

Rose and Ampera opened the bedroom door and walked inside. My companion was no filly anymore, and she had grown to be a mature and elegant mare. She wore her Wasteland gear no longer, having substituted it for

a stylish red suit that went along with her mane, now carefully combed into a topknot and held together with a pair of long pins, one ended on a rose and one on a strand of lavender. She was no longer the sweet little being I had met in the wastes, nor was she the demonic personality that had implanted in her brain in Stable 173. She was something completely different, still a noble soul but with the power and the cunning to enforce her ways. Her magic had excelled in defense and healing, and her natural charisma made her a great negotiator. I felt very proud of her, of what she had become over the years... she was the proof that I had done things right with her.

Ampera, on the other hoof, kept being the same tough and imposing pony, with the very aura of military awe and respect that had rendered me useless the first time I had tried to negotiate with him. She showed some signs of aging, such as wrinkles around the eyes, but she kept fit and strong. It was good to have her on our side.

“Hi Farsight.” Rose waved a hoof when she entered the room. “This is the one? She’s caused quite a commotion, you know.”

“A pegasus falling from the sky is not something easily concealable.” I shrugged.

Rose took a step forward and began examining the wounded mare, while humming a tune and taking notes with a pen held by telekinesis. Every now and then she would whistle or grumble, but she kept analyzing the pegasus with extreme care.

“She’s pretty battered, but I won’t be able to know how far the damages go until we remove the armor.”

“Can we do that, Ampera?”

The former Steel Ranger took a step forward and took a look at the wounded pony, just to hiss in anger a second later. By the way she looked at our guest, she didn’t feel very comfortable alongside her.

“What is wrong?” I asked.

“That armor... that is Enclave gear!” Ampera roared.

“Enclave?” I felt puzzled. “What the hell is an ‘Enclave’?”

“The Grand Pegasus Enclave, to be more precise. It was a military government formed by the pegasi that fled after the fall of Cloudsdale, who claimed to be the righteous owners of Equestria. Really dangerous ponies that had top-notch technology, as you can see. This armor is far better than the ones of the Steel Rangers, much lighter and stronger than mine, for example. Still, what worries me is that they were defeated twenty years ago... but I’m seeing a pegasus clad in Enclave Power Armor right now!”

“Wait a minute... twenty years ago?” I smiled. “Don’t tell me it had something to do with the Light Bringer.”

“Make your guess.”

“OK, I’m assuming that is a yes. But, twenty years is a long time... she doesn’t seem to be twenty years old.”

“That is what worries me.” Ampera groaned. “What if they weren’t destroyed?”

“I suppose that some remnants would have to have outlived the main army. Small combat groups, detachments that couldn’t join the main army, explorers... They might have regrouped, but I doubt that they can muster great numbers. Still, whatever they are up to, if they even exist, is a mystery to us unless she lets us know; and to do that, we need to heal her properly. Can that armor be removed, Ampera?”

“Give me a minute.”

Ampera fiddled with the armor, looking for something to trigger, while we waited nervously to carry on. Suddenly, the gear of the pegasus emitted a purple burst of energy, making us leap back, startled.

“That was the spell matrix going down. It should have been smooth, but since the armor is damaged... Anyway, we can unlatch it now.”

We began to work hastily, carefully finding and undoing each connection between the plates of the damaged armor, to then remove each and every piece; revealing a broken and ripped black and gold jumpsuit over the

gleaming white fur. Her body being stripped of her armor was something strangely arousing, and I had to concentrate on the rational part of my mind. Soon, her body was free of any restraints and Rose began using her magic to examine and heal her.

“Hmmm... the armor did a fine job indeed.” Rose mumbled. “She has a concussion and a broken wing, as well as some fissures in the forelegs and multiple muscular strains, but nothing too heavy. Her internal organs seem to be fine, but I would need to take her to a hospital to perform a complete exam. “I’ll fix her for now, but once she’s conscious she’ll have to be thoroughly checked.”

Rose’s horn glowed and parts of the pegasus’ body began to move on their own, as bones began to relocate and muscles reached their original length. Such processes had to be painful, but since she was unconscious, I assumed she wasn’t feeling anything. Wait, was I actually worried about her? I didn’t even know who she was or what she wanted, but she had already dug into me...

“Well, that’s all I can do for now.” Rose sighed. “She has to rest, so that all the fixes I did work properly. Once she’s back on her hooves, though, we should convince her to be examined.”

“Certainly.” I nodded. “I’ll stay here until she returns to the world of the living.”

“That’s swell, because it’s getting late and Dee is going to kill me if I don’t get Atreid and Harko back for dinner.” Nadyr smiled. “See you later, folks!”

The half-zebra turned around and strutted out of the bedroom, while Rose gave me a quick nod and followed him.

“I’ve got some reports to finish for the next meeting.” She smiled. “Although I have the feeling that the subject will have absolutely nothing to do with them.”

“You know me far too well.” I smiled.

“Well, nevermind. I’ll finish those anyway. Are you coming, Ampera?”

“Sure, I’ll follow you.” Ampera nodded, and the two mares left me alone with a sleeping pegasus that made my heartbeat lose control.

She was something totally alien to the world I had lived in. Pristine white, fiery red and deep blue, clean and tidy, put together in a body whose shapes were like the music of the spheres. Nothing was out of place in her, nothing was missing either. His face was graceful and cute, with a perfectly round muzzle that was just waiting to be booped by somepony. The neck descended in a perfect curve that had no bumps or irregularities until the very flank, as if a designer had devised her shape in a single stroke of a prodigious brush.

She was breathtaking, and seeing her lying on my bed, clothed only with a ripped flightsuit while her chest rose and fell was making me totally uncomfortable, so I galloped for the bathroom. I needed to let some steam off if I was to continue watching her for an undetermined time.

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I stood there for hours, looking at the pegasus with starry eyes, almost daydreaming of her beauty, while the night moved forward and a new day broke on the horizon. While gazing at my guest, I lost track of time and even of my daily needs. Despite all the hunger and the lack of sleep, I didn’t want to do anything more than to wait for her to wake up.

“Uhhhh...” She moaned, out of the blue. Even her voice was attractive, and something in me reacted in kind.

“Celestia, have mercy.” I sighed.

“Urgh... where am I?”

“You’re awake!” I almost pranced and trotted towards her. Her newly-opened eyes shone like amber... beautiful, beautiful amber.

“I... guess.” She was still confused. “Where am I? Who are you?”

“My name is Farsight. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Do you know who you are?”

“Of course I do... My name is Avro DeHavilland.”

Her accent reminisced that of Mixer, maybe a tad less clear than the one of the ghoul, but it was certainly there. Also, Avro DeHavilland... even her name was distinguished and beautiful.

“Miss DeHavilland, you won’t happen to come from Trottingham, will you?”

“Trottingham? You can’t be talking seriously... uhn. That city was destroyed long ago, and it’s not inhabitable yet.”

“I happened to meet a Trottingham ghoul, and your accent is similar. That’s why I asked.”

“Oh, well...” Avro sighed. “I am skyborn, but my family comes from Trottingham. That would explain the accent. Still, Farsight, if that is your real name, where am I?”

“You are in New Pegasus, milady, and you are safe now.”

“Really? This is New Pegasus?” She almost leapt off the bed. “Did I make it down here?”

“Well, you took a pretty bad hit in the landing, but yes, you’re alive and kicking, in the Spire of the Platinum Horseshoe.”

“Did you pick me up, Farsight?” She asked, looking at me with intention.

“Yes. You are my responsibility now, since I am the leader of New Pegasus. However, first I need to know what your intentions we-”

Avro had leapt from her lying position and held my hooves tightly, while she looked at me with gleaming eyes and a broad smile on her face. Could that be a side-effect of the recovery?

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” She squeed. “I thought I was done for... and I didn’t know where to go! I knew that New Pegasus had to be around here so I dove for it... and you saved me!”

“I didn-”

“Come on, you!”

Avro pulled with a strength that I hadn’t even deemed possible and I fell onto my bed; and then, before I could even say a single word, she kissed me. I opposed no resistance to her tongue exploring the insides of my muzzle, and soon I was doing the very same thing, caressing her gorgeous body as we rolled on the bed. It was a moment of bliss, and the memories of Stuka began to be substituted by the very avalanche of feelings of that moment. Avro took a step back and looked at me with lustful eyes, her white wings outstretched and her hoof going for the low end of my...no.

“Avro, I don’t think this is even right.” I shook my head, my reason kicking my libido in the shins. “We don’t even know each other.”

“Who cares.” She whispered. “You and me, now. I’ll show you how we do it in the air.”

“But Avro...” I almost came with that last phrase. I really wanted to, but something inside me told me that I didn’t want that to be a sex-based relationship. I wanted something more.

“What is it?” She smiled lustfully.

“Avro, I don’t want to rush this... I think that you might be the mare of my dreams, and I want this to go seamlessly, and I don’t think that having sex the first time we meet is a good idea... I hope you understand. Besides, you’re still recovering from your injuries!”

Avro hummed and smiled. I thought she might feel bothered by my worries, but she took it in quite a sporty way.

“How sweet.” She giggled. “Any other stallion wouldn’t have even thought of it. You’re definitely different, and I like that. Don’t be mistaken, though. I don’t consider this a one night stand, as long as you don’t think of it like that. I’ll be honest with you: I think I will like you. Who knows, I might even love you, but for now, why don’t we just enjoy this moment of alone time?”

“If you put it that way...” I smiled. “Your reasoning is flawless, milady. Lead the way.”

“I love when stallions talk suave to me.”

Avro smiled and unzipped her broken flightsuit, while I did the same with my clothes. Then, I smiled as her angelic white wings embraced me and guided me to a heaven of pleasure. To even think that I had been about to say no!

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“Wow, Farsight, you have some experience in this, don’t you?” Avro giggled, her foreleg stretched over my body.

“It’s not my first time, if that’s what you’re asking.” I smiled and turned around to give her a soft kiss.

“I assumed it wasn’t your first time, dummy. I meant with pegasi. How else did you know that my wings were my soft spot?”

“Oh, you mean that!” I laughed softly. “Well, it’s not my first time with a winged being, but it is with a pegasus.”

“Wait a minute, does that mean that you actually...?” Avro began to laugh uncontrollably. “You, and a griffin? HAHHAHAHA!”

“What?” I asked. I didn’t know whether to laugh with her or to feel bemused. “What’s so laughable about it?”

“No, no, I meant no offence.” Avro regained control after a serious laughter. “It’s just that I never thought that a griffin and a pony would even want to share a bed, let alone... Wow, if you managed to get one of those hulks into your bed, you must be a true master. Although I do understand why she would, actually...”

“Well, she was a very sweet individual.” I smiled sadly. “She still means a lot to me.”

“Where is she, anyway?” Avro asked, a bit suspicious. Mentioning Stuka might not have been a good idea.

“She’s dead. She died eight years ago, during a riot.”

“I am sorry.” Avro hugged me. “Eight years of absence, that must be tough.”

“More or less. The truth is that I’ve been able to do a normal life, except when it came to finding a mare... I’ve had a lot of failed relationships over the last years.”

“And this?” Avro curled beside me, whispering in my ear. “Will this be another failure?”

“I swear to Celestia that I’ll do my best for it to be a success.” I kissed her in the muzzle, while I used my magic to caress her white wings. Avro replied with a gasp of pleasure and kissed me once again, while my hooves slid down her back and to her flank.

“I’ll do too... If you want to.” Avro winked. “You just need to find a mare that will make you feel happy and that will love you for what you are. I can try to be that mare.”

“But you don’t even know me, Avro, the same way that I almost don’t know you.”

“And yet here we are, naked and sweaty, looking at each other. You’ve showed me your biggest scar, your deepest source of pain; and you’ve done it because you wanted. That tells me that, whatever you act as, you’re a good pony in the very deep, and that’s the only thing that matters for me. I don’t know if we’re a perfect match, but I really want to try.”

“I want to try too... Maybe I was too scared to commit myself. Still, you’ve been kind to me and what’s more important, you’ve been sincere in your feelings. For the first time in many years, I feel like I could live with you indefinitely.”

“You can be so sweet...” Avro kissed my back and my flanks, and she winced at the sight of my Cutie Mark.

“What’s wrong?” I smiled. “It seems like you’ve seen a ghost or something.”

“Your Cutie Mark is a red eye?”

“Yes. It’s no big deal, to be honest.” I caressed her perfect back. “What about yours?”

Avro turned around nervously, and showed me her flank. Three concentric circles, in blue, white and red formed a target. Beautiful and elegant, I really liked it.

“It’s beautiful, Avro. What makes you so nervous?”

“Nothing, nothing really.” Avro smiled. “This symbol brings a bad memory to us pegasi... Apparently, a pony named Red Eye was involved in our downfall twenty years ago. That’s what they told me.”

“You’re a part of the Enclave?” I asked.

“The Enclave?” Avro laughed. “Not any longer. It was destroyed twenty years ago, and while many of my kind decided to live in the Wasteland, some others, such as my parents, occupied settlements that had been abandoned in the Great Scramble.”

“The Great Scramble?”

“The battle that meant the end of the Enclave. My parents tried to find peace by keeping away from the rest of ponykind, probably driven by the feeling of guilt for what they had done in the past.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“You don’t have to, Farsight.” Avro smiled sadly. “We make choices, and those choices can be right or wrong. We pegasi chose wrong since the attack on Cloudsdale. It was time for Nature to bring some balance to the world.”

“If you say so...” I shrugged. “Why did you fly away, though?”

“Because things are not so perfect up there anymore... My parents are not there to keep me at bay, and we were beginning to repeat the mistakes of the past. I needed to get away and warn somepony before we faced another Great Scramble.”

“I see...” I looked at her in the eyes. “What did you expect to obtain here, though?”

“I don’t know, really. Maybe a chance to establish contact and to negotiate something. With enough backup, I don’t think that they would dare to attack.”

“They? Dare to attack?” I leapt from the bed. “When?”

“I don’t know.” Avro shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t!”

“I believe you.” I sighed. “Well, so much for a calm morning, I guess. Avro, you should get dressed. We need you to tell us all you know about your fellow ones up there and about what they’re planning to do.”

“Farsight, I should have told this before. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, Avro.” I hugged her to calm her down. “I haven’t asked either, and besides, you just snapped out of a coma. I can’t expect you to remember everything.”

“Thank you, Farsight.” She released herself and walked to her broken jumpsuit. “I guess that I will have to fit in this now.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get you properly clothed later.” I smiled, while putting on my trousers and fiddling with my tie. “Now we must hurry. The sooner we get the information you have to give us, the better we will be.”

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The presence of Avro didn’t go unnoticed by the population of New Pegasus. The white winged mare turned everypony’s heads in the Strip, sparking faces of curiosity and surprise in the bystanders. She would reply with a smile or a wink of complicity, but I was trying to walk around unnoticed. Guess it was simply impossible, so I slowed my pace and turned at Avro.

“Tell me, Avro, what did you do up there? Before you flew away, I mean.”

“I worked as an engineer there.” She smiled. “I was in charge of our fleet’s propulsion systems.”

“Your fleet?” I gasped. “Are you serious? Your former friends have a war fleet up there?”

“No, no, it wasn’t a war fleet. It was a peace fleet.”

“A peace fleet?” I raised my brow in bewilderment. “Would you explain me what a peace fleet means?”

“You know that the cloud cover is receding, don’t you?”

“Judging from here, I don’t see any significant differences.”

“No, the Divide is a force that keeps the cloud cover together, I’m afraid. However, at the other side, a megaspell set off twenty years ago...”

“By the Light Bringer, I presume.”

“Exactly. As I was saying, a megaspell literally depleted the cloud cover, and the remaining areas began to become smaller and smaller minute by minute. If we wanted to remain isolated from the ground, we would have to live in floating platforms, that’s why we built a fleet, our voluntary exile.”

“And you worked there?”

“Yes, the Fleet wasn’t ready, and my job was to fix the engines and to develop a proper lift device that could withstand the massive size of the airships.”

“Could that fleet be used for other purposes?”

“You mean for military ones?” Avro asked. “I guess. I don’t really know much about the full design, that would be simply impossible. I have no idea of what the other workers were doing, so there could be a possibility.”

“Avro, I need you to tell me the truth.” I looked at her sternly. I loved her, but I needed her to be true for once. “What made you escape the clouds?”

The pegasus looked to one side and sighed.

“Look, Farsight, I was happy up there. Things were looking good for us and there was a great chance of finally living in peace without having to hide beyond the clouds. We knew that the ponies on the ground would see our ships, but we didn’t really care, as long as we had the possibility of going separate ways.”

“I am guessing that something went wrong.”

“Not all the pegasi shared the same view of the future. Some wanted to continue down the same path that had almost driven us to destruction, even if we were less and definitely not ready. However, they managed to get control of the structure of power, and began preparing themselves for war.”

“Against whom?”

“I don’t know. As soon as I found out, I tried to flee unnoticed and bring the news to the ground. If my brethren are getting ready to attack, I must try my best to stop them.”

“But you didn’t manage to get out unscathed.”

“No, they managed to track me down and they almost killed me. I was able to throw myself below the cloud cover before they could take a clear shot.”

“That’s when you landed here. I guess the sudden burst of activity in the radio was caused by your escape, am I right?”

“You were able to hear it?”

“Only clicks and clacks, but there were a lot of communications right before you fell.”

“I see. It’s encrypted, that’s why you couldn’t hear the actual words. Still, I am surprised that you managed to find our frequency.”

“I have my methods.” I smiled. We had already reached the Council Building, a small and anodyne construction on a side street. It had been built like that in a blatant demonstration that the City Board was completely submitted to the rule from the Casinos.

“Stop it, you!” Avro kissed me in the cheek and gave me a pat on the back. “We must relay that information to everypony around here.”

“No, we must decide what to do with that information, and that’s why I’ve summoned a meeting in the Council. Come, it’s your great moment.”

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The Council Hall was a large round chamber covered in blue wallpaper and wooden panels, giving it an old-time feel. The thick carpet on the floor muffled the sound of hooves walking around, and the large table in the middle of the room was covered in papers and folders. Glasses of water were located in front of each member of the Council, and a large screen showing a computerized representation of the map of Neighvada presided the meeting. On it, the forces of the NER and those of the Tsardom were represented in red and blue, while the City of New Pegasus and its surrounding territories glowed in a green light.

I smiled at the sight of the ponies that composed the council. Apart from me, Rose was the one with a more important position as a spokespony. Despite her young age, her natural wit and charisma had made her earn the respect of all those who had met her, and of course, that of the fellow Council members. She smiled back at me, always being kind and friendly, but she didn’t smile at Avro. I wondered what caused her to react so badly to the pegasus... maybe it was something of her past I didn’t know?

Standing at her side, Dee Cleff looked like a true authority on the room, like a wise mother to whom everypony would pay respect to. Signs of ageing were more patent on her than in anypony else, such as greying hair and some light wrinkles, but she wore them with pride. She kept dressing with class, wearing this time a loose white dress and a cream-toned jacket that went simply great with her fur. She bowed respectfully to the both of us, unlike my companion.

Nadyr was close to her wife, after having left Atreid and Harko in charge of a foalsitter. My companion acted the same way as always, being warm and friendly with a big smile in his face. His past had taught him to respect the different, there was no doubt about that. Ampera and Saddle were there too, looking at Avro with a lot of doubts in their faces. I knew that the former Ranger had a quarrel with the pegasi, and it was probable that she had shared it with his husband. Still, I would have to see how they would react to what the winged mare had to tell them.

“Mares and gentlecolts, welcome.” I greeted. “Let’s begin with this Council meeting, shall we?”

“You’ll have to tell us what is so urgent, Farsight.” Dee’s voice was stern, although her face let me know that she had a good disposition towards Avro.

“As you see, we have an unexpected guest.” I pointed towards the pegasus. “She has some valuable information to share with us, and we must decide what to do with it.”

“Speak up, then.” Saddle groaned.

“For sure I will.” Avro smiled boastfully. “Hi there. My name is Avro DeHavilland, and as you know, I come from the other side of the cloud cover. Before you ask, yes, there are pegasi living above the clouds. We...”

“You still live up there?” Ampera interrupted. “Is the Enclave still functioning?”

“The Enclave? Hell no, at least it wasn’t when I fled. We learnt from our mistakes, and we swore never to commit them again. However, we knew that many ponies would shun us for what we had done, so we decided to live in exile.”

“That sounds all very pretty, but how can you explain your power armor. It’s standard Enclave gear!”

“It’s because originally, my community was formed by Enclave fledglings, and we kept the schematics of their armors for our purpose. I am surprised that you know about our gear, since Neighvada was never involved in the dark plans of my ancestors.”

“I am... was a Steel Ranger, and my Chapter had to fight the likes of you.”

“Really?” Avro squeed. “A Steel Ranger? I have been dreaming of the day I would meet one of you! Tell me, what sort of spell matrix would you use for a heavy duty armor?”

“Uh... what?” Ampera was caught off guard by Avro’s question.

“Look, I have worked as an engineer for my entire life, trying to find arcano-mechanical replacements to unicorn magic. One of my last projects was to develop a matrix for a heavy duty armor meant for rough environment work, and I simply couldn’t find a proper spell matrix documentation. I tried the T-34 incantation matrix, but it wouldn’t hold the plates together.”

“That’s because the T-34 was a total flop.” Ampera shook her head. “We constantly banged our heads against the wall until we were able to develop the T-37.”

“The T-37...” Avro whistled. “I had no proper data of that, but I knew that it had to be the solution!”

“Ladies, this was not the reason of the meeting.” Nadyr coughed. “You can discuss this later, if you are interested.”

“Sure, sure.” Avro nodded. “We focused our energies on building a fleet of airships to act as our moving homes, since the cloud cover that had harbored our buildings was beginning to fall apart. However, some of my people didn’t think that it was a good idea to remain isolated from the rest of ponykind, and they wanted to reveal themselves.”

“I am guessing that they didn’t mean to come down peacefully, brandishing rainbows and sunbeams, right?” Rose spoke with evident disdain.

“Sadly, no. There was a revolt and the power changed hooves to those who wanted to walk down the same path that had led to our destruction. That’s why I flew away... I felt like I had to warn somepony about the plans of those above.”

“Why did you come to New Pegasus?” Dee asked.

“It was the closest settlement... and the biggest as well. I thought that maybe you could help me.”

“Tell me, Avro, why should we actually help you?” Rose said coldly. “If you haven’t noticed, we are a small city without a proper army or military technology, surrounded by two warring empires whose position towards ourselves we don’t fully know. A wrong move and we would be destroyed.”

“Rose, I think you’re not understanding what our guest wants from us.” Dee smiled. “I don’t think she’s asking us to fight for her, she just wants our influence to warn the world of a possible threat. We could use the diplomatic ties we have with the Republic to echo her message across the Wasteland. Besides, I doubt that the NER would like to wage a war on two fronts.”

“That is exactly what I need!” Avro pranced. “Thanks for being so understanding, miss...”

“Dee Cleff. Call me Dee, Avro.”

“I don’t see why the Republic would fight the pegasi either, Dee. They’re entangled in a conflict with the Tsardom, and besides, many pegasi are part of the NER army.” Rose shook her head. “I hardly see why it’s our responsibility to do it.”

“Somepony has to, Rose.” I replied sternly. “What happened to that of being kind and making justice?”

“Farsight, we have no proof of whether her words are true. We can’t go spreading lies around there based on the testimony of a single pegasus that we know almost nothing about.”

“I would agree with you, but I don’t see what she has to hide.” I replied. “Ponies do things according to plans, because they want to obtain something in exchange. Avro hasn’t asked for anything, and I believe that she won’t in the future. I trust her, Rose, and that should be something to be considered, since you know how I am in that matter. Don’t you trust me?”

“I do...” Rose sighed. “But I think that you might be growing a bit too overconfident in the matter.”

Remember what we are, and who we can be facing if we make a mistake. I don't care if it's Praline or the Tsar, or whoever the fuck is in charge up there; assuming there is a faction in the sky. Anyway, we won't be able to win a war against either of them, so we need to think carefully and act humbly to keep our status; and frankly, I think that she has clouded your judgment."

"Hey!" Avro yelled. "I haven't done anything to him!"

"Haven't you?" Rose smiled malevolently. "Why do I have the feeling that you two have already shared a bed?"

"Yes, we have." I nodded. "Why do you think that it should be a problem, Rose?"

"Because you're acting in a way that I have never seen you." Rose squinted at Avro. "You trust her too much, and I don't like that. We don't know what she might be bringing behind her, and despite that, we open our doors to her and welcome her as a friend... or a lover!"

"Jealous, Rosie?" Nadyr smiled kindly. "You should be glad that good old Farsight has found his significant other. I think that Avro fits him like a glove, personally, and all those fears about an incoming war don't necessarily imply that we are going to be the ones under fire. As far as we know, those pegasi could be knocking at the gates of New Canterlot right now!"

Right as Nadyr was saying those last words, an alarm began to ring and several new symbols appeared on the battlemat, coming from the north. By the way they advanced, they had to be either motorized or flying, and we found out that it was that last possibility when they crossed a river at full speed. Suddenly, the map went black and it was replaced by an incoming communication.

"Who is it?" I fumed. "Pass it through."

The face of a tough-looking copper-colored stallion in a peaked cap with a red star on it appeared on the screen. His voice was dark and his accent was strange, with rolling 'r' sounds, and his expression was stern and almost evil. He brought no good news, that was certain.

"Leaders of New Pegasus." He almost grunted. "This is Comrade Commander Ilyushin of the Communist Pegasus Front. We know that you are harboring an escaped traitor, and we demand that you return it to us. We will give you three days, and if she's not with us after those 72 hours, our fleet will show no mercy. There will be no negotiation. Our conditions are final. Return miss DeHavilland to our control, or your population will suffer the consequences. Glory to the Red Front!"

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Note: Reputation Change

Tsardom: Potential Target. The intentions of this mysterious faction towards New Pegasus remain unclear. However, their behaviour doesn't leave much room for good expectations.

Communist Pegasus Front: Warned. They are showing their war machine off, but they are giving you a fair warning. Consider your reply carefully.

## Chapter 20: Skyfall

*“Welcome back, mares and gentlecolts, to another hour of radio in your favorite station, New Pegasus Radio, with me, Miss New Pegasus, taking you through the night! I really hope you’ve enjoyed the music as much as I have, folks. Octavia is great on her own, but combined with the vocal power of Sapphire Shores, what you get is a total meltdown! You know, I feel like a filly every time I walk into the archive room and begin searching through the records, with all the classics literally popping out of the shelves. It’s so good to work in a place where there is so much history and quality condensed, believe me!*

*It’s time for the news, though. I’ve been told through many sources that our interview with the ever so secretive Farsight has caused quite a commotion in the streets! Apparently, the population of New Pegasus was irking to hear their silent leader make things clear, and the work of this station and this humble mare behind the mike has been key to bring his word to the commons! For that, we feel very proud! Also, after having compiled some of the opinions of the ponies in the street, we can say that Farsight’s popularity keeps peaking day after day. The current City Board has been doing things right and that can be felt in everyday life. Let’s hope that they keep it that way.*

*Now, speaking of commotions, something totally unexpected and out of the blue hit the city of New Pegasus yesterday: a pegasus fallen from the skies! Yes, folks, no matter whether you believe it or not, a winged pony came crashing onto Union Square from beyond the cloud cover. Such an uncanny situation was quickly addressed by the local authorities and, according to the witnesses who were standing close, the members of the City Board themselves took the newcomer under custody. It is not our common practice to question ponies who come to our city, but a pegasus is something out of the ordinary. Further news have not been made public yet, so we keep waiting.*

*Outside of the walls, the battle rages on between the clashing forces of the New Equestrian Republic and the mysterious Tsardom. The key point of resistance keeps being the narrow ravine that leads to Hooper Dam, where none of the two armies are being able to amass enough forces to turn the tide of the battle. Can we be witnessing a change in the way that war is being fought in the Wasteland?*

*Let me elaborate. So far, the way that armies have fought wars in the Wastes has been that of the Republic. Ever since the industry beyond the Divide was able to restart the fabrication of armored chariots and magic-powered engines, the mobile warfare has been the way the NER has employed to expand and recover more and more territory. However, it seems that even all that power and technique has been countered by the less sophisticated ways of the Tsar. This unknown leader uses ponies en masse to drag the combat to a grinding process where mobility is useless, and that is, apparently, what has caused the Republic to suffer terrible defeats in faraway lands.*

*Also, we have some unconfirmed reports of a third armed force incoming from the north, but we have had no chance to confirm or deny that aspect. The funny thing about these rumours is that they speak about flying vessels! I don’t know about you, but frankly, I had never heard about the possibility of a flying vehicle of any kind beyond the small flying wagons of before the War. Whoever they are, they would require a level of technology that has never been seen in Neighvada in more than two centuries. We will stay alert for further news on the matter.*

*For now, however, the time for information is up, and we’re moving into entertainment once again! At this time of the night, I think that our best option is to indulge ourselves with another jam session of Vinyl Scratch, don’t you think? Get comfortable, relax, and dance to the beat of the best DJ of old times! I’ll be back in an hour! Remember that you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly to your hearts!”*

*“Leaders of New Pegasus. This is Comrade Commander Ilyushin of the Communist Pegasus Front. We know that you are harboring an escaped traitor, and we demand that you return it to us. We will give you three days, and if she’s not with us after those 72 hours, our fleet will show no mercy. There will be no negotiation. Our conditions are final. Return miss DeHavilland to our control, or your population will suffer the consequences.*

Glory to the Red Front!”

The screen flicked back and returned to the map view, where the dots symbolizing the Red Fleet kept advancing at a slow but sure pace towards us. The announcement and the surprising appearance of another enemy above had turned the mood of the meeting from a leveled calmness to a total gloom. Everypony’s face showed a mixture of fear and anger, and even Nadyr’s cheerful self had turned to a dark grimace.

“I knew it!” Rose blasted in rage, walking around stomping the floor. “I knew that she was trouble! Farsight, don’t you tell me to trust her anymore.”

I felt enraged at Rose’s reaction. By not trusting Avro, she was spreading doubts about my own capability to handle the situation, and I really didn’t like it. We had a lot behind us, and I was willing to give her another chance, but Rose would have been nothing without me. I fumed and groaned, but tried to keep as calm as possible.

“Rose, you are not being fair.” I shook my head. “What would you have done if you were in my place? I thought you were a kind soul!”

“A kind soul!” Rose laughed. “Says he who has shown no mercy when it came to fulfilling his plans! Farsight, you are not the one qualified to speak about kindness.”

“Those are technicalities, Rose, and you haven’t answered my question yet. If you were to decide, would you have kicked Avro out of New Pegasus?”

“Maybe not immediately, but I would have definitely not fucked her!” Rose roared. “Now we are three days away of being obliterated because of that bitch!”

“Rose, we don’t know yet if…” Ampera tried to step in.

“No, Ampera, don’t try to defend her. For all that we know, this could actually be a scheme of the Reds to invade New Pegasus with a proper casus belli, just because miss Whitewings here managed to get Farsight to swallow all her words like she did with his…”

Avro flapped her wings and leapt over the table, landing beside Rose and slapping her across the face with her forehoof. I noticed tears in the eyes of the pegasus, as if she had been really hurt by the harsh words coming from the enraged mare’s muzzle.

“How dare you?” Avro cried. “I can take many things, but I won’t stand idle while you call me a whore and a liar!”

“Take your hooves off me!” Rose groaned while backpedaling.

“Easy now, you two!” Nadyr galloped to the middle of the fray, trying to put some sense. “We’re not here to fight, we’re here to debate and decide. I would appreciate if we would put some work to get out of this tight spot together.”

“Exactly.” Saddle groaned. “We won’t get anywhere by picking at each other. All we know is that there is a certain Communist Pegasi Front that is threatening us. What they have to put on the table is something I would really like to know.”

“Very good point, Saddle.” I smiled. “Maybe you can enlighten us, Avro.”

“Well, in terms of ponypower, I hardly think we are a force to be reckoned with. I believe that we are around two hundred pegasi, if you count out the foals and the elders. Assuming that there will be no discards, there shouldn’t be much more than two hundred and twenty, give or take.”

“Two hundred and twenty?” Ampera whistled. “All geared up like you?”

“Most of them, I suppose. I am counting engineers and pilots as well, who wouldn’t be so battle-ready.”

“Still, such a number of power-armored ponies is something we would hardly be able to confront in a one-to-one fight.” Ampera shook her head. “If your armors retain the quality of those of the Enclave, you would need some serious firepower to pierce through them.”

“Do we have the means to obtain that firepower?” Dee asked.

“No, currently we don’t.” Ampera groaned. “Sunset Hills has a weapons facility, but there is no chance that we are getting output in time.”

“Then what should we do?” Dee mumbled.

“Simple.” Rose fumed. “Give the pegasus back to her folk.”

“That should be our last choice, Rose.” Dee flicked her ears. “We have given shelter to Avro, and we’re bound to protect her, as long as our security is not compromised.”

“Compromised? Dee, are you even listening to yourself?” Rose grunted. “There is an army knocking at our gates, not to mention what the NER might do about it. We couldn’t be more compromised!”

“Yes, things are tough.” Dee said coldly. “However, we’ve been through tougher ones. May I remind you that we had the army of the Republic knocking at our gates eight years ago? They didn’t warn us, they came with the clear intention of taking over our city!”

“Do you really think that you’ll be able to talk them away this time?” Rose squinted. “You are a bit too overconfident, aren’t you?”

“No, Rose, I want to try and reason with them.”

“Dee...” Avro mumbled. “I don’t think Ilyushin is of the reasoning kind. I know him from long ago, and he was as stubborn as a pony can get. Besides, what really worries me is the Fleet itself.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Saddle coughed.

“The main purpose of the Fleet was to serve as a home in our exile, so we designed it to require as little pony intervention as possible. This means that most of the Fleet is controlled by computers, both the navigation and the weapon systems.”

“Which implies that they could be bombarding us without even being close, right?” Ampera mumbled.

“More or less, yes.” Avro sighed.

“Crap. That changes the situation.” Ampera facehoofed. “I was expecting to take them out on their airships.”

“How were you expecting to do that, Ampera?” Rose whined. “We don’t have ponies or firepower, you said that yourself!”

“It was just theory, Rose. The Fleet would be a chokepoint for their troops.”

“Exactly, this is all theory!” Rose spoke coldly, but her words cut like knives. “I say that our only chance to solve this problem is to return Avro to the Red Front and just fucking forget about it! This is not our war!”

“You may be right...” Dee sighed.

I had been silent all the time, looking for a way to solve the problem that wouldn’t imply me giving Avro up. I loved her, at least I felt something for her that I had only felt for Stuka, and the loss of the griffin had been a burden that had followed me for eight long years. I wasn’t going to give her up that easily, no matter what my friends said. There had to be another way!

Luckily for me, I had aces up my sleeve. While the argument was taking place, I slid out of the Council Hall and asked for a communication link with the headquarters of the Republic. With a pinch of good fortune, I would be able to get through to somepony who would understand our situation and would help us. Back at the Hall, I pushed a button in a terminal to open the transmitter, and the face of Harpsong Heartstrings appeared on the screen.

“Ah, Farsight. I knew it had to be you.” She smiled.

“Harpsong, it’s good to see you.” I smiled back. “How are things going on the frontlines?”

“Tough. Those Tsardom ponies seem to know the terrain they’re treading. We’re constantly being ambushed and our advances are always countered in the most effective way.”

“I hope that it’s just an appreciation of yours.” I shrugged.

“Did you contact the Republic without telling us?” Dee mumbled.

“Dee Cleff herself, what a pleasant surprise.” The green mare smiled malevolently. “How has life been treating you, my dear?”

“I can cope with it, thank you very much.” Dee smiled back with the same evil look. The two mares didn’t see eye to eye, but that wasn’t something necessary at the moment. “How about you, Harpsong? I hear you’ve been doing a lot of tourism lately. Is there anything worth seeing beyond Hooper Dam?”

“Just lots and lots of Wastelands, honey. You can’t even imagine how far they stretch.”

“I get the notion, more or less.” Dee grinned.

“Good, good for you.” Harpsong seemed to notice Avro for the first time. “Wait a minute, is that the fallen pegasus?”

“My name is Avro DeHavilland, thank you very much.” Avro stuck her tongue out in defiance.

“Vice-President Harpsong Heartstrings. You and I have a lot to talk about, young lady. To begin with, I would like to know about your relationship with Farsight. You two seem to be very close.”

“How do you even know that?”

“The Republic has eyes and ears everywhere, darling. You can’t even fart without us noticing, and besides, considering the level of commotion you have caused; you shouldn’t be surprised that almost all of Neighvada is looking at your beautiful flanks.”

“My what?” Avro stuttered.

“Your flanks, Avro, your flanks. Frankly, looking at you I’m not even surprised that Farsight welcomed you so quickly. You got on his good side.”

“Harpsong, the relationship between Avro and I is something I would be delighted to discuss with you in another time. Now, we have a far more important matter to attend, and that is exactly why I called you.”

“Really?” Harpsong waved dismissively. “What is it?”

“What do you know about a certain Communist Pegasi Front?”

“Communist Pegasi?” The green mare laughed. “If I didn’t know you, I would have said that you are completely out of your mind.”

“Harpsong, I am serious. Very serious. Do you know about them or not?”

“I do, but frankly, I don’t think they are more than a bunch of lunatics that want to commemorate the times of the Grand Pegasus Enclave. Don’t tell me you’re scared of them.”

“Whenever I am threatened by somepony, at least I consider my options with much care.” I frowned. “The fact that they’re willing to destroy New Pegasus in three days if we don’t comply with their exigences tells me that they might not be bluffing, Harpsong.”

“Sweet Luna, Farsight. There was always a chance of you going paranoid, but I thought that you had enough inner peace to keep your sanity at a normal level. Guess I was wrong.”

“What about the fleet that has appeared in our maps?” I asked, frowning. “Do you think the computer has gone paranoid too?”

“I’ve seen the reports, and I believe that they do have air support, but we have no proof that their ships have indeed firepower. We’ve sent troops to investigate, but for now, they are not our concern.”

“Harpsong, is that your name?” Avro took a step forward.

“Yes. What is it, sweetheart?”

“Listen to me, Harpsong. I know what we have up there, and believe me, it’s not a pair of skiffs. We

improved our designs, made them bigger, better and stronger; and if my theory is correct, they will be packing guns from the first to the last deck. How can you say you're not concerned?"

"Avro, is it?" Harpsong looked away for a second, then focused on the pegasus. "The Republic is a very large nation that has to look after its population, first and foremost. The function of the NER Army is to keep the enemies of our own away from our legitimate territories, and that is our top priority. If you haven't noticed, the armies of this... Tsar are giving us a bit of a hard time, so we can't divert all our troops to investigate a possible group of winged gung-ho imperialists who want to relive better times."

"Fair, Harpsong, I understand that." I nodded. "The situation over at Hooper Dam is critical, and you need to keep focused on it. However, keep in mind that New Pegasus is a key transit hub for your troops and your supply lines. We are determined to keep supporting you in your cause, but we need a bit of help right now, or we might be taken over by the Reds. Do you believe that this Front will actually help you like we do?"

"We have no idea, but honestly, hearing you even consider the chance of the Red Front taking over New Pegasus makes me want to laugh. Seriously, Farsight, I've seen you play against worse odds and win. Has power actually made you soft?"

"Maybe." I shrugged. "Maybe I have more to lose and less to win, but mark my words, Harpsong, you have a lot more to lose than I do. A war on two fronts would bleed you dry, and you don't want that, do you?"

"Of course I don't."

"Then give us some support, and we'll handle the rest."

"You don't need support to take care of the situation. Besides, the Republic is in no position of helping you out right now. Farsight, I really believe in your capability of dealing with the Communist Pegasi Front. The New Equestrian Republic is counting on you. Harpsong out."

The screen faded to black and returned to the battlemat of Neighvada. I felt angry at the Republic for having dropped me at my time of need, but then again, they had their reasons. The war with the Tsardom was no little thing, and it was obvious that it would consume most of their resources. However, I had expected a bit more of help from them. I guess that Praline hadn't forgotten our bravado.

"Was that your last chance, Farsight?" Rose said calmly. She had left her rage aside and was moving towards a calm smugness. "Did you expect the NER to come and save you?"

"I was expecting more of a deal..." I groaned. "They know that I'm right! They simply have to, they're not dumb after all!"

"Of course." Rose grinned. "But they don't value your offers anymore. They've used you, and now you're worthless to them. Big surprise."

"Well, that was a possible outcome. It just changes our way of proceeding." I shook my head.

"Farsight, please, be reasonable. They want Avro, why don't you just let her go? It's her life against those of all New Pegasus!"

"I have to agree with Rose on that one, Farsight." Dee sighed. "I think there is a higher risk if we leave her here, and I don't want to incur such a cost."

"Really, Dee? Are you going to give up without considering resisting?" I winced. "I realize that the Reds have done a bombastic presentation, breaking into our meeting and all, but what have they actually made to convince us of giving up? Nothing!"

"Darling, Farsight has got a point there." Nadyr mumbled. "As far as we know, they're all bark and no bite, and even with all that Avro has told us, we can't expect them to be a true superpower; even less considering what the NER thinks about them."

"So much disinterest worries me, Naddy." Dee looked doubtful. "It's just as if they didn't want to know about the Reds."

"Maybe they don't want to know for now. Maybe they want us to do the scouting job for them."

“And are you up for it?”

“I want to be safe, dammit. If that means that I have to prove that the Red Front is a real issue, I’m willing to do that.”

“Nadyr, please... Think on Atreid and Harko.”

“That’s what I’m doing! I want them to be free; free from the NER, free from the Tsar and free from those Communist motherfuckers!”

“Dee, Rose, I support Farsight as well.” Ampera groaned. “Don’t get me wrong, I still don’t fully trust you, Avro, but I wouldn’t like to be caught in a conflict with the remnants of the Enclave. If possible, I would love to expose them or take the fight to their turf.”

“Ampera, you too?” Rose groaned.

“Of course.” Ampera stomped the floor. “I will not budge to the cowardly menaces of a bunch of malevolent pegasi who want to impose their way for a second time. I was born and trained to do this very thing!”

“Saddle?” I asked. “What’s your point of view?”

“Whoa, easy there.” Saddle blinked and coughed. “Don’t get me into this mess. I’d put the pegasus in a gift box and I’d send it with my best regards to this Ilyushin pony. I don’t want to fight an entire army, I just want to watch my income grow. War is bad for business.”

“I understand. Some of you want to fight, some of you want to accept their demands.” I grinned. “However, I definitely won’t admit to lose Avro, so I am going to do whatever it takes to force the NER to make a move against the Front. Whoever wants to come with me, I will welcome him or her.” I stomped the floor. “Don’t get me wrong, there will be no hard feelings if you decide not to follow me. You have your reasons, they are all very valid, but I have mine too, and I’m standing up for them.”

“Farsight, I know what is to be loved and fearing to lose that special pony.” Dee said calmly. “I understand perfectly that you’re willing to take on the entire Wasteland to protect Avro, but I would ask you to think things coldly before doing anything you can regret.”

“Not doing anything right now, or giving Avro away for that matter, would be the decision I would regret more, Dee.” I sighed. “This is something I have to do for myself, and as long as there is any chance of saving both her and the city, I will push for it.”

“Then, I think there is no way that I’ll be able to convince you.” Dee shook her head in defeat. “May the Goddesses be with you, Farsight, because it will mean that they are with us.”

“Thank you, Dee.” I nodded.

“Farsight...” Rose mumbled. “Maybe I’ve been a bit jealous at her, and that might have caused me to misjudge things. However, I think that it’s too dangerous to confront the Front on our own. I am worried about you, Farsight...”

“I know that you care about me, Rose, there’s no need to clarify that. However, you know me well enough to understand that I can’t back down now.”

“Yes, and that is what scares me. When you’re determined you push forward until the bitter end... for good or bad.”

I gave her a friendly pat on the head. For a moment, I had gotten really mad at her reaction, but in the end, I knew that she cared about all of us in such a great deal that it caused her to act like that. She had to comprehend that I had my own reasons for sticking to my initial idea, though. Such a situation was bound to arrive, after all. Rose wasn’t a filly anymore.

“I’ll be careful, Rose. That I promise.” I turned to the rest of the ponies in the hall and shouted. “All right, everypony, meeting dismissed!”

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“Ampera, may I talk to you for a minute?”

The former Ranger stopped dead on her tracks and turned around to look at me. After the meeting, each one of us had gone separate ways. Even Avro had returned to the Spire to get her armor back on gear, despite having been damaged and disenchanting. On the other hoof, I had stayed on the Council Hall, looking at the moving dots in the map screen and analyzing theories on how to get a grip on the situation. The situation wasn't good at all, to be bluntly honest, but I had taken a decision and I simply couldn't back down.

Whatever the outcome was, though, I realized that the overall status of Neighvada wasn't positive for our interests, and I was starting to consider backup mechanisms for our own survival. For once in a long time, I had the chance and resources to plan ahead on a long term, and one could never be cautious enough in such dire circumstances.

“What do you want, Farsight?”

“I need to discuss certain matters with you.” I said on a low voice.

“Matters that require privacy, I assume.” Ampera grinned.

“Yes, but not in the sense you're thinking.” I shook my head and looked at her sternly. “I have begun to consider the possibility of a tactical retreat.”

“A tactical retreat? To where exactly?” Ampera squinted. “It's not like we have a hinterland or something like that.”

“I plan to build a hinterland.” I said calmly. “Whether we like it or not, we're caught in the dead middle of a conflict between the Republic and the Tsardom, and frankly, I wouldn't want to be here when the armies clash at our gates. That's why I need to know if there is a place where we can retreat to.”

“Why are you asking me this?”

“Because you have the background of a Steel Ranger in you. You have trodden the Wasteland, and I am quite convinced that you and your Contingent mapped the territory long before any other force began to expand here. If there is somepony that knows where to build a safe community and how to do it, that's you.”

“Thanks for the compliments, Farsight, but I am beginning to think that you might be a bit paranoid.”

“Call it whatever you want, I call it having a last resort.”

“Don't you think that the NER would notice a group of ponies building a settlement?”

“Ampera, I seriously doubt that the Republic has enough ponypower to keep all of Neighvada and the surrounding areas under control. No matter how thoroughly you patrol the Wasteland, there will always be black spots... and I am looking for such a black spot.”

“Well, I can get the idea of what you are asking me.” She scratched her chin and nodded. “There might be a place that fits your needs. The Contingent built a bunker in a valley very close to the Divide, so close that its magic influence clouded any tracking device. Naturally, we resorted to less technological methods, such as compasses and orienteering maps.”

“That would be a very good place, indeed.”

“Do you intend to begin the construction immediately? Right now there are other things we must take care about.”

“I know, the Reds.” I groaned. “No, the construction is not a priority, provided that things keep being as they are now. However, if the situation gets worse, I needed to know where to send a pioneer party.”

“You're not going?” Ampera blinked.

“A captain never leaves the sinking ship. That's my principle.”

“Funny that you have principles, Farsight. You never cease to surprise me.”

“I like to walk one step ahead of the world.” I smiled. “That brings me to a second matter I need to talk to

you about.”

“A second matter... this gets interesting. What is it.”

“The Stable.”

“Oh, your former life. I was wondering when you would finally decide to do something about them. I thought you were bitter, but you’ve shown a surprising level of restraint so far.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking, Ampera. For now, the Stable Dwellers can do whatever they like. They can keep their stupid Lottery for themselves. After all, what lies outside is far better than the dull life of the inside.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Well, in the event of a takeover, the Stable could work as a viable shelter to stay away from the invader and reorganize. However, I would like to dig a tunnel around it and secure a clear exit to the Wasteland that doesn’t imply traversing New Pegasus.”

“In order to let the inhabitants escape unnoticed from a potential enemy. I see, very cunning. You want to hide beneath the noses of the invaders.”

“When things are too close, you can’t see clearly.” I smiled. “That’s why enemies tend to hide beside you.”

“I agree.” Ampera nodded sternly. “I think that it will be easy to do. Connecting the Stable tunnel to a sewer pipeline would take only a few ponies working a couple of days, and you would be able to redirect the Dwellers to one of the cisterns in the Wasteland; far away from the city walls.”

“Great then. When could you get it done?”

“Don’t even worry about it.” Ampera waved a hoof. “I’ll summon a team of builders in a minute, and I’ll get them on the task. In a couple of days, it should be solved. Also, lend me your PipBuck for a second.”

“OK.” I stretched my hoof to her, and she fiddled around with the device. A little while later, it beeped and Ampera let me go with a smile.

“Done. The coordinates of Fortune’s Loss are here.”

“Fortune’s Loss?”

“The name of the base. Don’t look at me, I wasn’t the one who named it.”

“Of course. Thank you, Ampera.”

“You’re welcome. One more thing, Farsight. If we’re going to fight the Reds, we’d better have a good plan on our side, as well as a lot of firepower. You’ve seen what I can do in a fight, so imagine that multiplied by two hundred.”

“I can see your point.” I sighed. “I count on you to help me, though.”

“To the very end.” Ampera nodded, and turned around. “To the very end.”

The former Ranger walked away, while I smiled comforted by the fact that there was a chance of getting out of a possible lockdown of New Pegasus. The next thing to concentrate on was how to face the threat of the Communist Front, and to do that, I needed the help of Avro.

I galloped to the Spire, longing to see the pegasus once again, to be with her and to feel her body next to mine. I could feel my thoughts drifting away from the matters of war and state, and flowing into images of her beautiful white body moving close to mine, while she whispered soft words into my ear and covered my weary skin with kisses... Maybe Rose had a point. I didn’t think very clearly when she was around.

While the elevator climbed to my topside office, I struggled to keep my mind focused and my body calm, but it was an ordeal like I had never seen before. My relationship with Stuka had never made me suffer that much... was it because she was a griffin and I knew that there was little we could do apart from snuggling a bit every now and then? Or was it because I had changed and I desperately needed the love of a mare?

“Avro, are you ready?” I called her when I walked into the office.

“In your bedroom, hun!”

“What are you doing there?”

“It was the best place to get ready! Now come and help me out, will you?”

“Fine, fine.”

I walked towards the bedroom and opened the door, and my jaw almost fell to the floor. I was expecting to see the pegasus clad in her black and gold armor, but instead I found her lying on the bed, her white fur shining in the electric light, while she looked at me with sultry eyes and smiled. Her Cutie Mark swayed from left to right as if it was a target in a shooting range. Something twitched in me, and I believe that I flushed red.

“A-Avro, weren’t you supposed to be getting ready?”

“I was born ready.” She slowly crept out of the bed, moving in a really seductive way. “Now come and relax with me, will you?”

“I-I hope you remember that there’s an in-incoming army.”

“They’ve given you three days!” Avro smiled and began unbuttoning my suit. “That time is more than enough to deal with them.”

“That means that you know of a way to do it.”

“I might.” She winked. “But I am not too sure about whether I should tell you or not.”

“Avro, please, you must tell me. Our lives depend on it.”

“Don’t be such a drama queen, Farsight.” She kissed me softly, like a warm breeze, making me twitch. “I will tell you, but first things first.”

“I-I-we can’t waste any time!”

“Who says that we’re wasting time?” Avro giggled while she took off my shirt. “Am I a waste of your time?”

“N-no, I never meant that!” I stammered.

“Just kidding!” She laughed, and she sounded like something glorious. “Of course you don’t think that, now relax. You’re always so stressed, Farsight, that you don’t enjoy what you have got.”

“I have too many responsibilities to be able to relax... and more now!”

“Come on, darling, anypony would take a step back and a breather in your situation.” Avro pulled my pants down with a strong tug, making me leap not to fall down. We were on equal terms, equally naked.

“I will do it once I have dealt with the Red menace, Avro. Please tell me how to...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence, as her muzzle and mine fused in a tight kiss. From there on, my mind drifted away and I let myself go, playing with our tongues in a sort of wet wrestling match.

“Hush now, Farsight. Come to bed...”

Avro walked away and stepped onto the bed, laying down seductively. Almost working like clockwork, I got near her and began to caress her softly, rubbing my hooves against her soft white fur and sniffing her beautiful mane, kissing her neck and feeling her warmth close to mine. She kissed me back and whispered in my ear alluringly.

“I want you...”

“I want you too...” I replied.

She shifted and welcomed me inside her, rocking back and forth as we became one momentarily, shaking and enjoying each breath and each second of that instant that appeared to last forever. Our gasps seemed to

synchronize and the world ground to a stop for us. Avro cried my name while I cried hers; and for a short period of time, there was no telling where the boundaries between us two were.

“Will... will you be mine, Farsight?” She gasped and panted, her body covered in sweat.

“Always.” I replied, still trying to catch my breath. “Until the end of my life.”

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“How is the world above the clouds?” I asked, looking at the crystal dome that covered the bedroom of the Spire.

“It’s not that much of a big deal.” Avro sighed. “You’ve got clouds below and the sky above, and well, there are buildings here and there, but you wouldn’t be able to live in them.”

“I know...” I mumbled.

We were lying on the bed, held together, naked and all sweaty. The enemy was still there, coming closer, but somehow, that seemed to be a very distant problem. The only thing that mattered to me was to enjoy the time I had to share with Avro, and being beside her was what soothed all my wounds.

“By the way, what happened to your legs?” Avro asked. “They’re made of metal...”

“Not really, the flesh and bone are inside, but one of them is badly damaged. I took... a bullet to the knee eight years ago, few days before becoming the leader of New Pegasus.”

“I remember hearing things about riots... We didn’t get much information up there.” Avro shrugged. “What happened exactly?”

“Well, you could say that I stirred a bit of a revolution in town.” I smiled, remembering the time when I had something to fight for. “I got on the wrong side of the important ponies of New Pegasus, but was able to drive them against each other.”

“Somehow I can picture you doing that.” Avro laughed softly. “That’s when you broke your leg?”

“I got shot, remember?”

“Oh, yes, silly me.”

“Never mind. My scheming caused the two factions to start fighting each other, and once I took over one of them I had to deal with the other. The bullet that crippled me was the gift of the leader of that faction. Of course, he ended up dead.”

“Did you kill him yourself?”

“I was in no condition. Nadyr did.”

“You two seem to get along very well...”

“We go a long way back.” I smiled. “He might be a lot of things, but he is loyal to the bone. Did you know that the first time we met he tried to kill me?”

“Really? And you became friends after that?”

“Well, he had his reasons to do what he did, and I had my reasons to forgive him and bring him to my side. In the end, what began as a commercial agreement ended up in true friendship. You never know where your real friends are, after all.”

“What about the young mare, Rose?” Avro kissed me. “She is quite mad at me... do you think she might be jealous?”

“Rose, jealous?” I laughed. “Maybe, who knows, she’s in that age. Naah, I think she does it out of honest care. You will find very little ponies in this world that are as kind and noble as her.”

“What about you, Farsight? Nadyr is loyal, Rose is kind, what are you?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you!” Avro laughed. “I want to know how you define yourself.”

“I’m just a normal pony. If I had to focus on something, I would say that I am mostly rational. My mind has always been my greatest asset.”

“Do you consider that something good?”

“What is good and what is not, Avro?” I smiled. “I try not to get into such considerations. After all, what benefits me and my close friends might be good for me but evil for others. That’s why I always measure things in terms of profit and cost.”

“Isn’t that a bit too rough?”

“Maybe, but so far it has worked for me. I am on top of a great city, I have good friends and I have you beside me.”

“You might be taking many things for granted, you know.”

“Who knows, you may be right. However, as long as they have an incentive to stay by my side, they will do that.”

“Really?” Avro giggled. “And what is MY incentive?”

“Wasn’t this an incentive to you?” I laughed. “Now seriously, I promised to give you all that I am, and that begins by fighting off Ilyushin’s army. You said you had something we could use, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I do.” Avro stretched and rolled out of the bed. “I think I know how we can bring the fight to their side of the field.”

“I’m all ears, honey.”

“First of all, we have to deal with their cloud cover...”

“How can we do that? All I see up there is clouds, and I have no idea how they’re held together...”

“It’s simple... we build on them. Before the War, we pegasi used to control the climate for the earth ponies and the unicorns. We moved clouds, formed winds, caused rainfall and thunder... However, keeping clouds together required of at least one pegasus watching to avoid those white bastards from drifting away. We found out, though, that by building on top of clouds we were able to stop them from separating, although they could still move as one.”

“I guess that by linking each patch of clouds you could form a consistent layer.”

“Exactly. Mostly, we built cloud hubs that would form a network of patches who would be connected to each other. Every now and then the network has failures and you folks can see a bit of open sky, but we solved it promptly.”

“I see. So, you imply that we should take out those hubs to dismantle the cover, right?”

“Right!” Avro giggled. “I see somepony is a smart pony.”

“And you’re hot for teacher.”

“Shut up!” Avro squeed and kissed me.

“Come on, tell me how are we supposed to do that, taking into account that you’re the only one here who can actually fly.”

“Well, there is a place where we could try...”

“Try what? I still don’t see where you’re going.”

“It’s quite simple, actually. We need to find weapons that could hit us from the ground. Big weapons.”

“Like missiles or something? Where could we find such things in the Wasteland?”

“I can’t say for certain, but some years ago we sent a scouting party to a small abandoned airbase to the

North... a place called Neighliss. Does it ring a bell?"

"I remember to have read the name someplace, but that's all. A name."

"Well, Neighliss was a tiny air force base in the North of Neighvada, a facility from before the War. Considering that we didn't care much about what happened beneath the clouds, we sent many scouts to investigate the base, and I would bet my mane that Ilyushin has sent troops to secure it now that they've made their move upon us."

"If I were him, I would have."

"Me too. I guess that there has to be something that can prove dangerous for the Reds." Avro began fitting into her jumpsuit. "Most probably, a working missile system in the base, and if we can fire it against the hubs, there will be no cloud cover for them to hide over."

"I think it's our best choice." I nodded while I pulled my pants back up.

"Do you have an army we could use?" Avro smiled.

"An army? No, that would be too risky. We will try to get there unnoticed. The idea is to strike at them without causing a commotion that would bring their entire fleet upon us."

"I see..." Avro groaned. "I would have preferred to pack some firepower, but I understand why we have to go the sneaky way."

"Well, I think that packing firepower will not be something we have to worry about..." I smiled cunningly.

"What do you have in mind?"

"We have allies we can resort to, you know..." I tightened my tie and smiled.

"Perfect." Avro smiled and latched the last part of the armor. I did the same with mine and packed my guns in my saddlebags.

"Shall we go?"

"After you."

We left our home and walked down the Strip chatting calmly, just as if we weren't about to confront an army of pegasi by ourselves. The whole situation had something unreal to it, as if we were disconnected from the world; however, we both knew that as soon as we made our move, we would be sucked into a turmoil of chaos and violence. Those moments of relative peace would be the last ones that we had guaranteed.

Our steps took us to the Tesla Bar, where Ampera was waiting for us in the backyard. She had her armor on, except for the helmet, and a whole rainbow of guns was displayed on a table, all of them shiny and ready to go. The former Ranger was moving in her element when handling guns, armor or any kind of machinery, and her face showed that she enjoyed doing it. When we walked in, she greeted us with a smile and a bow.

"Welcome, Farsight. I had the feeling that you would require of me." She smiled.

"Once a Ranger, always a Ranger, right?" I laughed. "You can smell the battle coming, can't you?"

"Certainly." Ampera nodded. "After having seen what happened in the meeting of the Council, I assumed that we were going to fight, so I began to prepare myself."

"Not a minute too soon." I grumbled. "You can imagine why we're here..."

"You want me to go with you."

"Precisely. We intend to pull a surprise attack on a small facility we believe is being held by the Reds, and we would require your firepower."

"What sort of foe would we be facing?"

"I doubt it would be a large force." Avro answered. "Probably a dozen troopers at most. What we should definitely avoid is them calling for reinforcements."

“Which means that we have to be swift and deadly.” I added. “Your aid would be perfect in this endeavour.”

“Well, I told you I would fight.” Ampera nodded. “I like to stand for my word, so count me in. Also, I see that you have managed to repower your armor, Avro.”

“Yes, I have.” Avro smiled. “It took me some time, but after all, the spell matrix used for this kind of gear is stored in a gem inside the plating. I just had to reactivate it carefully.”

“You pegasi are such clever bastards...”

“We try very hard.” Avro grinned.

“However, I’m seeing that you lack any kind of weapons.”

“Yep. I had to make a quick escape, so there was no time to grab my gear. At least I could retain my armor.”

“Then I guess there’s no problem in lending you some of mine.”

“Thank you.”

Avro began to move up and down the table where the guns were displayed, looking at them with expert eyes and trying them on her battle saddle, balancing them from side to side and considering her options. While she was doing that, Ampera came to me with a couple of boxes floating beside her.

“If we’re going against armored ponies, you might want to switch to this ammunition.” She passed the boxes on to me, and I saw she was giving me enough armor-piercing rounds to take on a whole battalion. It was good to have her by our side.

“That’s quite a lot of ammunition.”

“Honestly, I had been stashing it for a time of need.” Ampera shrugged. “This might be that time after all. Besides, I’ve realized that those are rifle bullets, and I don’t tend to use that kind of guns.”

“Very thoughtful of you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Ampera?” Avro asked. “I think I’ve already decided.”

We turned around and saw the pegasus brandishing a saddle-mounted grenade launcher and shotgun combo. Nothing really subtle, but somehow I could have expected that from her. As far as I knew her, she enjoyed having a wild ride here and there. She looked really imposing with those large cannons at her sides, and her wings, broadly open, countered her small frame giving her a really tough look. If all the Red pegasi were like her, it would be a rough battle.

“A grenade launcher and a shotgun...” Ampera giggled malevolently. “Subtlety is not your game, is it, Avro?”

“I like to get things done properly, and there’s nothing more proper than a grenade to the chest. Besides, we’re fighting armored ponies, so I thought I could use something more punching than a minigun.”

“Ha ha.” Ampera grinned. “Don’t get me wrong, though. I think that some explosive persuasion would be very helpful if we want to ‘convince’ your kin to surrender.”

“I don’t want them to surrender.” Avro clenched her teeth. “I want them destroyed.”

“Whatever, as long as they are no longer a menace for us.” I smiled at both mares. “Shouldn’t we be moving? I would like to have this problem solved as soon as possible.”

“Certainly.” Ampera nodded. “The enemy doesn’t wait!”

We returned to the Strip and walked towards the northern gate of New Pegasus. I had considered calling Nadyr as well, but something inside me told me to leave him behind. There were many chances that the attack on the airbase would go wrong, and somehow I believed that being a father he would not like to put his life on the line for me. Hopefully, I would be able to talk to him about my decision at a later time.

Life, however, doesn't give you the chance to choose many times, and that was one of those situations in which one had to lower the head and accept what the world had readied for him. The half-zebra was standing in the middle of the street, with his face showing a malicious smile of satisfaction.

"Going somewhere, bro?"

"Nadyr..." I tried to smile.

"Come on, bro, I see you packing heat surrounded by two armored mares... You have to be going somewhere with bad intentions, and I want to know. Don't keep me waiting."

"Nadyr, we're going to assault an airbase that we believe the Red Front is using to hide some missiles."

"Missiles? And why the hell didn't you tell me?"

"Because I am worried about you, that's why."

"Worried?" Nadyr laughed. "You know that I love going on adventures with you, Farsight, why should you be worried?"

"Atreid and Harko should be a powerful reason for you to stay home."

"Farsight, I should feel offended for that." Nadyr frowned in a comic fashion. "You don't want me to go with you in case I get wounded or something like that?"

"In case you get killed, more precisely. Dee would never forgive me."

"Bro, you should know that both Dee and my children are perfectly used to death. We know that we keep living in the Wasteland, no matter how civilized we intend to be. They are perfectly capable of defending themselves and know that someday either me or Dee will be gone forever."

"Still, I don't feel well bringing you with me."

"I swear that if you don't let me follow you, I will make you feel physically bad."

"You should listen to him." Ampera laughed, her voice covered in static because of the helmet. "I wouldn't like to be on his bad side, armor and all."

"That's a sensible mare speaking, bro." Nadyr looked at me in the eyes. "You should pay attention."

"Fine, Nadyr." I nodded. "Somehow I have the feeling that I would be getting into some real trouble if I left you behind."

"Smart as always, bro." The half-zebra grinned. "Shall we go?"

"Yes..." I sighed, defeated. "Avro, lead the way."

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Traversing the Wasteland was like playing Stalliongrad Roulette with a gun that had a barrel of almost infinite shots. There was the chance of blowing your head off, which had you on guard, but after some time, things would get tedious. The desert spanned far and wide, with red crags and golden hills here and there, but there was nothing out of the ordinary happening during the most of the time. Of course, when something that would qualify as "extraordinary" happened, it meant gunfire and bloodshed, so in the end, one didn't know what was best.

Just in case things got ugly, Ampera had provided us with a set of short range radio transmitters. I used the one in my PipBuck and the former Ranger had another encased in her armor, but both Nadyr and Avro had no other chance of staying in touch. We forced ourselves to keep the chatter to a minimum, just in case we came across other radio-equipped ponies that could intercept our communications. One could never be careful enough these days.

We were trying to avoid contact with any living being in the Wasteland, for we didn't know who could be siding with the Red Front. If the pegasi found out that we were on the move, they would surely deduce that our objective was the airbase. Besides, every Wastelander from New Pegasus to the Divide knew who I was,

and the addition of a pegasus and a Ranger to our party didn't help us going unnoticed. The increasing amount of NER patrols in the territory wasn't helpful either.

Avro scouted ahead, flying at a short distance above the ground, circling the skies on the lookout for any relevant thing, while Ampera stayed at the rear, protecting us from any possible surprise attacks from behind. Meanwhile, Nadyr and I marched in the middle, with our guns ready and our eyes wide open.

"Avro, watch out." Ampera warned, suddenly. "Fly lower, life forms inbound at our two."

"I see them." Avro confirmed. "Returning to the ground."

"How many are them?" Nadyr asked.

"It looks like it's a whole combat group." Avro replied. "About eight or ten ponies."

I checked my E.F.S. after hearing Ampera's warning. It was true that a group of points had appeared in my display, but they were marked as not hostile and far away. It appeared that the Rangers had developed a similar system to that of Stable-Tec, but improved and more reliable. I trotted ahead up to a small hilltop at a safe distance from the incoming ponies and deployed my sniper rifle to take a closer look.

"What the...?" I groaned.

I found myself looking at a group of ponies dressed in strange and ornate armors that looked more visual than functional. The pieces of metal were joint together resembling scales and shone in the daylight, while feathers of green and gold formed makeshift wings and crowns. A motif was constant in the decoration of their gear, and that was the head of a dragon, roaring to the world. It was present in their plating, in their capes, in their flags... but what most worrisome of them was that I had seen those armors before. Long ago, when we were going to Neighorleans, we had an encounter with one of those bucks.

"What's wrong, Farsight?" Nadyr asked.

"Remember the pony that attacked us when we were going to the teleporter, eight years ago?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, these are his mates."

"Are you serious?"

"Why shouldn't I be?" I groaned.

"What is it, darling?" Avro landed close to me. "You seem worried."

"I don't know who these ponies are, but we fought one of them eight years ago, here in the Wasteland."

"That's impossible. Those are Tsardom soldiers."

"Tsardom soldiers?" Ampera roared above the static. "At this side of the river? It would mean that they have broken NER lines!"

"Are you sure about that?" I asked. "They don't look like a real army... I would say they are scouting."

"Then what should we do?" Avro looked twitchy.

"It's ten versus four, so I wouldn't recommend engaging." Ampera was also close. "It could mean suicide for us."

"I agree." I nodded. "Still, I wouldn't like Tsardom troopers walking close to New Pegasus. As much as I don't get along with the Republic, at least their ways are known to us. The longer they can hold the Tsar back, the best for us."

"Are you going to attack them?" Ampera grumbled. "Have you gone crazy?"

"No, I have a plan." I smiled.

"Then speak up."

“It’s fairly simple.” I shrugged. “I will pick them up from here, one by one, while you keep them suppressed in that pass down there. Of course, the more you can take out, the better. We rely on our capability of surprising them, so let’s be swift and sure.”

“Very risky, don’t you think?” Nadyr whistled.

“Are you chickening out?” I smiled at the half-zebra.

“No I’m not.”

“Then spread out!” I called. “I’ll give the signal.”

I began to aim my rifle and to calibrate the sights, while Ampera and Nadyr advanced as silently as possible towards the closest end of the pass. Avro was waiting for me to tell her when to take off, and looked at me with eager eyes. To be a simple engineer, she did enjoy the prospect of an upcoming battle, which was quite surprising and a bit off putting, to be honest.

“Are you ready?” I said to her. “When I take the first shot, you begin giving them hell from above. Keep a safe distance and avoid their counterattacks.”

“Easy now, Farsight. I know how to handle myself.” Avro winked.

“Ampera, Nadyr, same goes to you. I’ll shoot first, and then you keep them from advancing, understood?”

“All clear, bro.” Nadyr replied.

“Understood, Farsight. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

“Trust me, this will work.” I smiled. “Over.”

I concentrated on the sights of my sniper rifle. The group of Tsardom ponies moved calmly but in fighting order, looking everywhere in the search for possible threats. So far, they hadn’t noticed us, which was basic for our ambush to work. I aimed the crosshairs at the pony with the largest and most ornate armor, which according to Wasteland logic, had to be the leader of the group. I could see his green eyes looking directly at me through the telescopic sights, but I didn’t feel any remorse. I just smiled when I pulled the trigger.

“Bye-bye...” I mumbled.

**BLAM!**

The head of the pony I was aiming at burst in a cloud of blood and bone, and the rest of the Tsardom ponies jumped to the ground in disarray, just to return to combat stance and begin looking at the place where the bullet had come from. They had good training on their backs, that was certain.

“Now! Go!” I called.

Avro flapped her powerful white wings and leapt to the skies at great speed, while Ampera began shooting a barrage of gunfire against the confused group of scouts. Nadyr ran back and forth, unloading the barrels of his pistols with deadly precision, while I moved on to another target. Suddenly, fire rained from the skies as Avro performed a plummeting descent while unloading her grenade launcher.

“Woooooo!!!!” She screamed at the top of her lungs. “Take that!”

“Watch the fuck out, Avro!” Nadyr roared. “You almost had my ass burnt!”

“Sorry, Nadyr!” Avro giggled. “I always get a bit carried away with these things.”

“Carried away?” Ampera grumbled. “That was almost reckless.”

“Come on, you two... Spoilsports.” The pegasus whined through the radio. “They’re all gone, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are.” I replied. “But even I have to say that it was a bit too overkill, Avro. Be careful when using that thing of yours next time, OK?”

“You too, Farsight?”

“Avro, please.”

“Aw, all right...” Avro huffed.

“Darling, you’ll have the chance to blow Reds as soon as we get to Neighliss.”

“Fair enough, Farsight.” Avro laughed through the communicator. “You win.”

“Am I glad to hear that.” I replied. “Let’s move, though. I am sure that the chaos we’ve caused here will attract everypony in the vicinity. The sooner we get to our target, the better for us.”

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After almost a whole day trekking north, we finally reached the outskirts of the military base of Neighliss, formerly the pride of the Equestrian Air Force, now home to a group of pegasi that wanted to relive better times. The base wasn’t too big by itself, namely just the remains of a cracked runway, two or three ruined hangars and a control tower. However, the surrounding defences were strong and spanned wide, with long wire fences and pillboxes. In case of an attack, Neighliss was meant to resist.

“How the hell are we going to get through all this?” Nadyr gasped.

“I don’t think any of those pillboxes are full.” I replied calmly. “My E.F.S. shows no activity. How about yours, Ampera?”

“Nothing either. They must be all in the hangars.” Ampera replied.

“If there is anypony here, of course.” Nadyr smirked.

“They will be here. I know it.” Avro said sternly.

“If they are, won’t they see us coming?” I was worried.

“They certainly will, but I doubt that they will come out to engage us. Being so few, the best they can do is ring the alarm, call for reinforcements and entrench themselves.”

“But we’re only four.” I grunted. “They could easily take us out.”

“Ilyushin doesn’t like unnecessary casualties. Our population is quite scarce, you know.”

“Then, the drill is quite clear. Get to them before they can even notice, then blow them up without mercy.” Nadyr grinned. “I can live with that.”

“Me too, but there is a problem.” Ampera replied sternly. “I’m detecting mines around the pillboxes. There’s little chance we’re getting through unnoticed.”

“That will be a problem.” I groaned. “We can’t blow them up to ensure getting wounded or killed, but we can’t risk walking through them either.”

“I think I can solve that.” Avro smiled. “I’ll fly above them. Obviously, my former colleagues didn’t expect a pegasus to be trying to infiltrate their base. I’ll disable their communications and then you’ll be able to come in guns blazing.”

“I can’t say I like the idea of you going alone.” I grunted.

“Come on, Farsight, trust me. I’m well equipped and I know what I’m doing.”

“We don’t have any better options...” I shrugged. “Good luck, my dear.”

“Thank you.” Avro kissed me on the cheek and flew away. “I’m going offline until I get things done, OK?”

“Understood. Farsight out.”

We watched her fly into the base in silence, and something inside me squirmed at the thought of losing her. I knew that our best hope was that, and there was no doubting that she was well equipped and prepared for battle. In the best case scenario, she wouldn’t even have to fire a single shot to get the alarms disabled, but if things went wrong, there was a minefield between her and us.

“I am beginning to grow suspicious of her.” Ampera mumbled. “She seems to know more than she tells.”

“I agree.” Nadyr nodded. “No offence meant, bro, but she’s definitely hiding something from us.”

“None taken.” I replied. “There are some inconsistencies in her story, yes, but I don’t see any bad intentions in them.”

“The day I get to be able to judge intentions…” Ampera laughed softly.

“What do you mean?”

“Farsight, the more we speak with Avro, the less credible her story gets. I don’t find myself capable of reading a pony’s intentions; but then again, you’re the gifted one in that matter. Still, be careful about her. I don’t know what she’s after, but I think that she is more entangled to the Communist Front than what she wants us to know.”

“Ampera has a point, bro.” Nadyr smiled in agreement. “Look, she’s a fine mare and all that, and I am pretty sure that you two have become very close. I’m not saying that you dump her or put her under trial, but at least you should have her clarify her position. We can’t fully trust her if she’s hiding her cards.”

“I agree.” Ampera nodded. “We just need to set things straight and we will be able to carry on.”

“Ampera, Nadyr, I can’t believe I am hearing this from you.” I spoke coldly, although my companions’ words had left me scarred. “By not trusting her you are showing your lack of confidence in my judgment. I consider you my friends, I like you and respect you, and getting this in return hurts me. Avro has my total confidence, and whatever her motives are, I think that getting rid of the Reds will be beneficial for New Pegasus.”

“Farsight, I am trying to speak to your reason.” Ampera replied calmly but sternly. “Avro has a hidden agenda. For now, she’s fine cooperating with us, and there might be some feelings flourishing between her and you, but someday she might turn on you. The sooner you know what her real intentions are, the better it will be for you and for the rest of us.”

“She might just be keeping some things for later, Farsight, but you won’t know unless you ask her.” Nadyr smiled. “Dee and I hold no secrets to each other, that’s the base of a good relationship.”

“Hmm…” I huffed. “I admit that you have a point. I would trust her with my life, but I owe you the same treatment. I will make things clear when this is over. Does that make you feel better?”

“That would be a very wise decision, Farsight.” Ampera nodded.

I smiled, but in the inside, I felt something crumbling. I had to choose between the mare I loved and those who had been and were my friends. If I assumed that Avro was hiding something, why couldn’t I also assume that they were keeping things for themselves? Who was free of secrets in the Wasteland? Who didn’t hide a proverbial skeleton in his closet? Anyway, now that both Ampera and Nadyr were satisfied with my reply, I would ask Avro for answers when I found it fit. For the moment, getting into Neighliss was my top priority.

“Hel-looooo!” Avro’s voice rang through the communicator. “They’re out of the loop, so feel free to come in!”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Absolutely certain! In fact, don’t move, I’ll open up the gates for you!”

“Open up the gates?” I gasped. “Oh holy fuck. Get to cover!” I yelled.

“Coming thruuuuuuu!”

Avro had launched herself in another plummet with two armored pegasi on her tail, bombarding the minefield in a maelstrom of fire and shrapnel. My first experience with landmines had not been very pleasant, so I ducked as close to the ground as possible and prayed not to be hit by any of the bits of red hot metal flying through the air.

“OK, road’s open!” Avro laughed. “Now, would you kindly get them off my tail?”

“Count on it.” I replied. “Give them a straight trajectory.”

“Straight? Are you crazy? They’ll mow me down if I don’t keep evading them!”

“Fine, fine, have it your way.” I grunted.

I lifted my sniper rifle and activated S.A.T.S., watching how the frantic dance of the three pegasi crawled to a stop. I enjoyed every instant of that feeling, as time was halted and I had the chance of putting a bullet in a given place. My crosshairs connected with the helmet of one of the pegasi, and I pulled the trigger in a moment of pure joy. Dodge that.

**BLAM!**

The time shifted back to normal speed and the pegasus I had targeted flinched when the armor piercing bullet went right through his helmet. A blink of an eye later he was falling without control, which made his or her partner disengage the chase for a second. Avro used that edge to make a sharp turn and get the second assailant on her firing range.

“Kiss your wings goodbye!” She laughed and fired her grenade launcher.

The second pegasus exploded in a fountain of blood and gore, spraying all over the area like a cloud of red rain. The effect of explosives in midair was definitely something that caused true awe and shock in anypony watching. Now that the threat was clear and the way was open, we galloped into the base runway, keeping an eye out for more enemies in the vicinity. The E.F.S. showed no trace of activity, but it was not to be trusted when there were close environments nearby. I didn’t really know what could disrupt the magic of the Eyes-Forward Sparkle, but I had the hunch that other spell-powered devices might interfere with its system.

“You two work great as a team, you know?” Nadyr laughed.

“It was just a lucky shot.” I waved a hoof dismissively. “Avro, any idea of how many more Communists we might be facing in the facility?”

“Three or four at most. Now that they’re deaf and hoarse, they won’t be a real problem. What we need to do is find where the missiles are and how to fire them.”

“I would check the main tower. The hangars look too wrecked to hold any valuable equipment.” I shrugged. “Besides, they will be hiding there, most probably.”

“Let’s check it out, then.” I nodded.

As we were moving towards the tower, a sudden barrage of gunfire made us jump and run for cover. Avro leapt and gained altitude while circling around, looking for where the attack had been fired from. I checked my PipBuck but I simply couldn’t find any trace of the enemy... had it been a turret that we couldn’t see?

“Good, good, you’re still quick after that fall.” The voice of a mare echoed in the large open runway. “I thought that you would be hiding under your mattress now that the Fleet is coming for you, Avro!”

“Who is it?” I asked. “Friend of yours?”

“She never was.” Avro sounded pissed. “Grumman, you bitch. Attacking from the shadows, as usual? Come out so I can see you!”

“What fun would it be?” The mare called Grumman laughed. “I’m a single pony against four, and you’ve shown how capable you are. It’s a real disgrace that I couldn’t spot you before you cut our communications. Ilyushin would have been so proud to see you again!”

“Ilyushin can go stick his dick in a meat grinder, Grumman.” Avro roared. “I will deal with him when the time comes, but now you and I have a score to settle. Show yourself!”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Avro!” Grumman giggled.

“Avro, watch out!” Ampera cried. “Behind you!”

The white pegasus plummeted as a sudden burst of flamer fire appeared out of nowhere in midair. How was that even possible? She was hiding in plain sight!

“She’s using stealth technology!” Ampera warned us. “I think I’ll be able to read her heat signature as soon as she fires her guns! Avro, I need you to keep her attacking you!”

“I don’t think that will require much encouragement!” She rolled and gained altitude, dodging a hail of bullets, while Ampera galloped to get Grumman into firing distance.

While the Ranger and the pegasus were fighting an unseen foe, I grabbed Nadyr and galloped into the tower. If Grumman was the only remaining Communist Pegasus, we had a clear way to the control room of the missile systems. Besides, it would mean a proper distraction to that nasty hidden pony.

The control tower was nothing more than an old office building with little more in it than a couple of filing cabinets and some desks, apart from the top of the tower, where a terminal was lit and a microphone was connected to the speaker system of the base; which worked properly, according to the constant hum. Of course, it was locked, so I made myself comfortable and began hacking it carefully.

“Bro, I think your marefriend is having a hard time out there. Maybe you should do something about it...” Nadyr looked worried.

“I’m going to try something out. Keep your head low.” I replied.

“Oh no you won’t...”

“Avro!” I used the microphone instead of the radio. “I’m hacking the missile control system! It should be done soon, give me the coordinates to fire!”

“What the hell?” Grumman roared. “No, you’re not going to do that!”

“Ampera! Look at the heat signatures near the tower!” I called, before a barrage of gunfire burst all the windows open and flamer fire began flooding the room. “And do it quick, dammit!”

“Bro, I don’t like fire! It fucking burns!” Nadyr yelled.

“Never fucking mind!” I replied. “Get down!”

“Signature locked.” Ampera laughed. “Now I’ve got you, miss Grumman.”

A single shot came out of the former Ranger’s miniguns, and it appeared to bounce in midair. Suddenly, a flash of sparks filled the air and where there was nothing, a pegasus in red armor appeared. I couldn’t see her face, but I was quite sure that she had to be in a tight spot. With a malevolent smile, I used my magic to yank her into the control tower. She was too close to us, and if Avro had the idea of pulverizing her with a grenade we would become collateral damage.

“Nadyr, would you do the honors?” I asked with a smile.

“But most certainly.” Nadyr replied, and slammed the pegasus into the ground. “Welcome to your final minutes, miss Grumman. Any last words?”

“Blue and white, accompanied by a zebra. You must be Farsight.” Grumman laughed coarsely. “What a surprise. If I had known you were coming, I would have ordered cake from the mess hall up top.”

“Wrong answer, Grumman.” I used the full strength of my augmented hindlegs to stomp her helmet. Something made a nasty crack, but I couldn’t tell if it was the armor plating or the skull inside. “I was expecting something more in the lines of have mercy or I’ll tell you all you want to know.”

“My duty is my duty, Farsight.” Grumman laughed dryly. “You won’t make me lose my loyalty. The Red Front will prevail!”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong.” I shook my head and stomped again. Crack.

“There is no way... you can win.” The downed pegasus panted. “Avro... will not... get... what she wants.”

“What the fuck do you mean?” I roared.

“Avro... she came to you... for a reason.” Grumman spoke with a gurgling voice. “The Fleet...”

“What about it?” I shook her in despair. “Speak!”

There was no reply. Grumman’s head hung to the side like that of a broken puppet, and she wouldn’t react, no matter how violently I shook her. She had said something about Avro and the Fleet, but she had passed out

before we could pry any other information out of her.

“Grumman’s constants have fallen to zero.” Ampera said. “Are you OK?”

“Yes.” I replied. “Nadyr and I are fine, and the missile system is ready for data input. Avro, the coordinates!”

“Direction three-fifteen, elevation forty-seven, distance ten thousand.” Avro chanted. “That should be the first. Then go for two-six-eight, four-four, ninety-five hundred. Last but not least, one-five-five, sixty, three thousand.”

I typed the data she had told me and pressed the button. Something in the bowels of the airbase began to rumble and the ground shook. Out of pure caution, Nadyr and I galloped out of the tower, leaving Grumman’s broken body inside.

“What is going on?” I asked.

“The missile systems were underground.” Avro replied calmly. “The activation and firing order has to lift them into the open. Look!”

Several trapdoors had opened in the runway and missile towers were slowly creeping out of the gaping holes. Artifacts of shiny metal, almost undamaged by the rust and dust of the two centuries of inactivity, stood now in front of us, with long arms full with missiles aimed at the clouded skies. Without a warning, several of them activated their ignition and flew away in a trail of smoke, roaring like the thunderstorms in the Wasteland.

“This is going to be beautiful.” Avro grinned smugly.

“How do you...?”

**KA-BOOM!!!!**

The explosion that followed almost threw us to the ground, partially deafened and confused. When I looked up to the skies to get a glimpse of what was happening, I witnessed the most amazing of sights. The clouds had turned crimson and gold, as if the very sky was burning in the most virulent of fires. Something was falling from above, probably pieces of the buildings we had destroyed with the attack, and waves of flame seemed to propagate through the cover. Slowly, the clouds began to detach and the sunlight started pouring to the ground, filling the gaps that were forming in the still cloudy sky.

“Hell, that is incredible...” Nadyr gasped.

“The sky... it is blue after all.” Ampera sighed.

“That should leave them with no place to hide above.” I smiled. “Also, Avro, yes. This is beautiful.”

The cover was now nothing more than a bunch of stray clouds in an endless sea of blue, which lifted our spirits and made us smile in the deep of our hearts. Everypony in Neighvada would probably be watching, and that event would be remembered in History. What ponykind wouldn’t keep in mind would be that we had been the ones behind it.

“Very good!” Avro somersaulted. “That’s one hit they will not recover from.”

“I agree, but they will know where the attack has come from.” I mumbled.

“Yes...” Avro scratched her chin. “If I know Ilyushin right, he will have diverted the Fleet towards Neighliss. We must do something before they get here.”

“We could leave the base...” Nadyr suggested.

“No, don’t even think about that. These missiles can be used against anypony in Neighvada.” Ampera groaned. “Us, the Reds, the Republic, the Tsardom... we must ensure that we keep control of this facility. At least, that will give us some tranquility.”

“Avro, why didn’t Grumman use the missiles against New Pegasus directly?” I asked.

“I assume that they didn’t have hacking technology.” Avro shrugged. “That, or they want to capture the city

with the least possible damage.”

“That sounds possible.” I nodded. “Ampera, I agree with you, but we must do something against the Fleet.”

“Don’t even worry about that!” Avro smiled. “I have the answer you need. Follow me!”

“Quite convenient, huh?” Nadyr mumbled.

Avro led us to one of the hangars, where a machine different to anything I had seen before was humming. It was sleek and pointy, like a large knife. Its hull was mostly a straight fuselage ending in a pointy “beak” with two thin and triangular wings pointing backwards. Miniguns and missile emplacements were located beneath the mentioned wings and two gunner posts were placed in the loading gates of the gunship; which was floating at a short distance above the ground.

“What the hell is this thing?” I asked.

“You know, I wondered how they could have gotten here with all that heavy equipment and those mines, so I checked the hangars out to see what they had brought with them, and I found this!” Avro giggled. “This is a Mystral class light gunship, the best craft for quick and safe transport of ponies and goods. It’s nimble, it’s strong and it’s reliable.”

“You’re suggesting that we fly in that... Mystral?”

“Yes. We could intercept the Fleet easily before they get here.”

“With this skiff?” Nadyr laughed. “How do you intend to do that?”

“Trust me, I’m a great pilot.” Avro boasted.

“Whatever.” Ampera shrugged. “I’ll stay here and call for a backup team from New Pegasus, OK? You go and keep the Reds entertained.”

“Fair enough, I knew that we would have to take the fight to their terrain.” I shrugged. “Nadyr, are you coming?”

“I don’t like it a bit...” Nadyr grumbled. “But if I have to fight the Reds, I prefer to do it inside an armored vehicle.”

Avro had hopped into the gunship and had steered it out of the hangar. I jumped into the craft and helped Nadyr to climb inside. To be honest, I was feeling very insecure as well, since the air wasn’t my field of expertise, but Avro had a point when she said that we had to hit them instead of waiting for them to hit us.

“Are you ready?” Avro smiled. “Hold tight to something!”

Suddenly, the craft began buzzing and vibrating, and an immense driving force pushed us from behind, making us lose our balance. Hadn’t we been tightly held to the frame of the gunship, we would have rolled to the back end, with a clear risk of falling off, since the Mystral had no side doors. The force began to lift the craft from the floor, and an instant later we were gaining altitude, heading for the infinite blue, where our enemy awaited us. I just hoped that Avro knew what she was doing.

#

Note: Reputation Change

Communist Pegasi Front: Enraged. Your attack has left the pegasi without homes. Expect equivalent retribution from them.

## Chapter 21: Aces High

*“Good morning everypony, and welcome to a bright day in the Neighvada Wasteland! This is your all-time favourite station and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, here to bring you the best music and the latest news, and trust me, there’s a hoofful of them today! For now, a little recap on what we’ve been listening to this last hour. You know, I am more of a quick beat kind of pony, more prone to listening to Vinyl Scratch than Octavia, but the Concerts of the Equestrian Philharmonic Orchestra are a masterpiece of their own, and so they should be regarded. This last one was the choral ending to Beethayven’s Ninth Symphony, a very adequate piece for a day like today.*

*Because, frankly, what a day that of yesterday! I hope that all of you got to see the one-of-a-kind phenomenon that took place in the skies above us, because such things leave an imprint in a pony’s memory! For those of you who couldn’t witness it or have short-term memory issues, here’s what happened. A terrible explosion shook the world and the cloud cover turned burning red, then it started to detach and come off, and the sun shone through, letting us see the blue sky that has always been hidden to us. Today, the bright golden light of a clear day makes everything look better, even the Wasteland itself gleams!*

*Now, the theories regarding what happened to cause the cloud cover to come breaking down are as varied as they can get, and some of them are really wacky. We’ve got ponies speaking of a thunderstorm gone wrong, some others speak of a war above the clouds that has caused the cover to disintegrate, and there are ponies that claim that this is an omen predicting the arrival of the Goddesses to bring justice upon the sinful ponies of the Wasteland. The most accepted theory is that of an attack launched against an unknown faction that was hiding over the clouds. Who the attacker is and who the victim is, that remains a mystery.*

*On other news, the war between the Republic and the Tsardom keeps raging on through the Wasteland. As it tends to be the case in these situations, the informations we can get are contradictory and incomplete, but we’ll try to fill you in the best way possible. We do know for certain that the frontline lies still beyond Hooper Dam, in a cruel battle for the control of the crags that act like a trench system leading to the far end of the facility. The forces of the New Equestrian Republic attempted to push forward into enemy territory but were forced to retreat quickly, as the Tsar’s troops threatened to encircle them.*

*Beyond that information, all we have is rumours spread by caravaneers and Wasteland travelers. Some speak of an attempted amphibious assault of the Republic through Lake Honeymead against the undefended side of the Tsardom Army, but there is no proof that the NER has deployed or built any kind of craft. Another common tale that has grown lately is that of a Tsardom scout team who would have actually bypassed the Republican defences, just to be destroyed by another hinterland patrol. This last rumour might have a bit more of consistency, though, since some Wastelanders have found pieces of armor and weaponry that might belong to the invaders’ forces.*

*All of this makes me wonder, though. What will happen to the City of New Pegasus if the Tsardom gets beyond Hooper Dam? Let’s not forget that the electricity used in the City comes from the pre-War power station beneath the facility, and if the Tsar is cunning enough, he will already have planned to gamble using that card as soon as he gets his hooves on it. This war has not been a problem for us yet, but if the Republic is flushed out of the Dam we might be involved in the conflict in a way we don’t want to. My question is... have our current leaders thought how to deal with this situation?*

*Well, that is all the news for this hour, we’ll be back in another sixty minutes with a new batch of information to share with you. In the meantime, let’s return to some music! I have here a collection of Sweetie Belle’s greatest hits, ready to bring true delight to your ears. Once a classic, always a classic, don’t you think? Enjoy, and remember that you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking right to your hearts!”*

We were actually flying, one thing that I would never have thought we would be doing. After a rather rough takeoff, Avro had told us to lock our hooves to a series of security straps that would keep us in place despite all the twists and turns the craft made. This implied that we didn’t move, but the constant swaying and the

accelerations set our bodies into serious stress.

In my case, I had a mixture of feelings battling inside me, as this was a completely new experience for me. On the one side, there was this inherent fear of being out of one's natural element, and being airborne was something so alien to me that it confused and frightened me at the same time. However, altitude had something alluring for me. Knowing that we were standing far above the same red lands we had travelled earlier was strangely fulfilling and positive. The wailing wind, the speed, the accelerations, the twists and turns... all that was fearsome and at the same time really enjoyable.

Avro piloted the Mystral class gunship with evident knowledge and calmness. The takeoff had been a little shaky, but from that moment on the craft had moved with soft turns and steady advances, cruising through the blue skies towards the Fleet of the Communist Pegasi Front. We had been flying in a reverent silence, with only the roaring of the engines and the howl of the passing wind in our ears.

"How are you two doing back there?" Avro asked.

"I'm fine!" I replied. "It's just that this whole situation is... odd to me, that's why I haven't said a word."

"And you, Nadyr?"

"Let's say I'm getting along, shall we?" Nadyr grimaced.

"Come on, don't you tell me that I'm making this a rough ride!" Avro giggled. "This baby can be handled with a single hoof! It's the most stable thing you'll see in the Wasteland!"

"I don't doubt it's stable, honey." I laughed nervously. "However, you'll have to admit that we are a bit misplaced here. We don't have wings that can sustain us if we fall."

"Are you locked tight?"

"Of course."

"Then take it easy. Those straps were tried out with five times a pony's weight, and they could handle it during limit-g movements."

"Limit-g movements? The hell is that?" Nadyr mumbled.

"Corkscrews, loops at high speeds, sudden fall recoveries... stunt moves, mostly." Avro replied. "The kinds of tricks that a skilled pilot would pull off in the heat of battle. Those in the back seats must know that they can keep firing without having to fear being hurled off the gunship."

"You sure know a lot about all this." I grinned.

"Of course I do! These are my babies, after all."

"Really?"

"Yes, really! I told you I was an engineer! I designed and helped build the Mystral and many other ships that form the Fleet."

"Wow, that must have been amazing."

"It was, really. You know, moving past the dated designs of the Cloudships was quite a bugger. The biggest problem was relying on those large, bulky hulls that needed a lot of magic infused into them to make them float. My design team and I had to work very hard and do a lot of complex calculations to minimize the lift required to keep them airborne."

"How did you do that?" I asked.

"We found out that giving them wings and powerful propellers made the smaller ships remain up in the air when a proper speed was reached. In a sense, they are like us pegasi when gliding, it's the air itself what holds us from falling. Of course, we had to give them a pinch of magic to make the arcano-engines work."

"Magic? But you pegasi can't..."

"Of course we can't, but we found a proper workaround. We managed to discreetly get our hooves on a gem

mine, and by means of clever trading and shady businesses, we built a small enterprise that would get the gems and enchant them for us. Then, we would sell some and retain some for our purposes.”

“That is certainly cunning.” I smiled.

“It is.” Avro laughed. “But as much as I’d regret to say that, it’s not my idea. It worked like a charm, though, and we began building our ships without any restraint. We bought materials from beyond the Divide and used the gems to create flotation devices or arcano-engines.”

“I assume that the bigger ships won’t rely that much in speed. After all, moving large masses at high velocity would have an incredible cost in energy.”

“Very smart!” Avro laughed. “That’s why I love you, Farsight, you always understand things at the first glance. Yes, the main capital ships are more floaters than flyers. We needed to commission a real lot of gems, but it was only a matter of time.”

“Congratulations for that, Avro. Such a feat is incredible. You and Ampera should work together, I think that New Pegasus would benefit of your joint technical prowess.”

“I guess that we could talk about it when we came back.” Avro muttered. “Still, I don’t know how she would take it.”

“Everything can be talked calmly.” I smiled. “Speaking of peace and calm...”

“What’s wrong?”

“I am baffled about one thing, Avro. You said that you built your fleet to live in exile, but this is a gunship. You call it a gunship, and you don’t hide the fact that it has weapons. Not too peaceful to me.”

“Farsight, you should know that peace can’t be achieved if both parties don’t want to. As much as we would like to live in harmony with the world, if the rest of the ponies in the Wasteland don’t want such coexistence...”

“You say you need guns to enforce peace.” Nadyr said.

“Exactly.” Avro nodded.

“Well, that would explain things.” I mumbled.

I found Avro’s words vacuous and fabricated, and that made my heart squirm. Indeed, she was hiding something from me, and that felt terrible. Still, I didn’t want her to notice my growing suspicions. We would have to make things very clear when we returned home.

“You seem to be a skilled pilot as well, Avro.” Nadyr whistled. “I would say you have been flying these things for a long time.”

“Well, every pegasus up there has to be a pilot. Who knows who will have to take command of a capital ship or a small transport someday? We’re all trained to know how to handle ourselves with these machines, in case we need to take a step forward.”

“I see...” I mumbled. “So you could react in case of battle, wouldn’t you?”

“Certainly.” Avro nodded. “As long as there is a chance of being attacked, we need to know how to defend ourselves.”

Silence fell like a heavy burden upon us. Avro’s last explanations had been contradictory and heavily unsettling, as if the pegasus I had fallen in love with had a dark secret that she was reluctant to tell me, even if it was driving us to the verge of war. My words had been chosen with the intent of eliminating the doubts that Rose and Ampera had sown in me with a bit of clairvoyance or, probably, mare intuition. However, instead of doing that, the pegasus had replied in a way that had proven their doubts right.

I looked at Nadyr and met his gaze. The half-zebra was smiling at me, but unlike other times, his smile was sad. He was noticing the same lies and secrets in Avro’s words, and as much as he tried to like her, he couldn’t trust her; nor could I, really. No matter how hard I wanted to believe her and give her a chance to

redeem herself, I simply couldn't. For the moment, I would have to carry on with this endeavour of ours, but as soon as it was over, she and I were going to have a long conversation; and if I felt like I was being tricked, then I would have no choice than to ask her to leave, no matter how much it would hurt me.

"Hey, bro." Nadyr whispered so that Avro couldn't hear us. "I know what you're thinking."

"If you do, you'll be aware that it's not something easy to talk about."

"Yes, but we need to have a friend to friend chat. Now."

"Then go ahead." I frowned. "I don't think you're going to let me go anyway."

"Listen, Farsight, I have heard the same things out of her mouth that you have. I have noticed that her story is flimsy at best, and I have the same awry feeling about her. Still, I know how you cherish her. We could discuss whether you might have made a mistake by letting her into your heart, but then again, the heart and the mind work in different ways. Love isn't logical most of times, because, after all, it's love, dammit!"

Nadyr chuckled. "Don't go so hard on yourself. You needed somepony, and she happened to fall down from the skies upon you. She might have lied to us, but tell me, Farsight, what does your heart say about her?"

"My heart?"

"Yes, your heart. How do you feel in the very deep about her? Do you believe that she loves you genuinely?"

"Well, yes... I think she does."

"Then keep that belief in you, and expect for the best. If she is true, she will make up for her mistakes. You just need to give her time."

"What if she doesn't?"

"In that case..." Nadyr shook his head. "Well, let's hope it never happens, for our own good."

"Hey, you two, what's with all the chit-chat?" Avro laughed. "Would you mind sharing it with me?"

"Well, honey, we were admiring your glorious plot." I smiled. "That armor makes your rear view so... seductive."

"That's why we were keeping it to ourselves, Avro." Nadyr chuckled. "I am a married stallion, and we didn't know how you would react."

"You two are incorrigible." Avro giggled, pleased. "Next time, say it out loud. I always appreciate a compliment."

"Will do, my dear, will do." I smiled. "By the way, where is the damn Fleet?"

"I am picking up signals in the radar already." Avro said calmly. "I think we're about to meet the avantgarde of Ilyushin's group. I hope you are ready to rumble."

"I was born ready." Nadyr smirked.

"Great, because I already have a visual!" Avro shouted. "Look at your nine!"

I gazed out of the open door and saw what the pegasus was telling us. About one kilometer away from us in a straight line, another airship was cruising the skies. This one was bigger than our Mystral, but retained the wedge shape of our gunship, with the large backward wings and the frontal beak, but had a second suit of smaller wings at a higher level and its back gleamed with the pinkish color of arcano-engines at full speed.

"Is that one of the capital ships?" I asked.

"Meh, hardly. That's a Gale class frigate. It's bigger, tougher and it can hold more ponies inside, but this one won't get you through a barrage. However, it's plating is better than the one of the Mystrals. Probably, it's working as a radio beacon for the rest of the fleet, exploring ahead of the really big ones."

"And what are we going to do with it?" Nadyr asked.

"We're going to take it down!" Avro cheered. "Now hold on tight!"

At her command, the gunship made a tight turn towards the frigate, almost rolling to a ninety-degree position. If I hadn't been latched tight, I would have fallen into the void, and that very image made me shake in fear.

"Get ready to open fire at my order, OK?"

"Understood." I turned towards the gunner post and used my magic to handle the minigun, while Nadyr used the bite meant for pegasi.

We flew closer and closer to the larger craft, and I saw how it was distributed. Two decks formed the hull of the ship, with cannons and gunner posts sticking like spikes out of a raider's armor. Gems formed shield patches around vital parts of the Communist aircraft, protecting it from possible attacks, while two large red stars painted in the sides of the hull left no trace of doubt about who that hulk of flying metal belonged to. It was an imposing sight, and the fact that it wasn't the largest unit of the Red Fleet made me shake. How were we going to take them out by ourselves?

"Now, wait until I tell you." Avro squinted. "We won't stand a chance unless we hit them hard in their vital spots."

We kept advancing towards the Gale frigate, moving parallel to it, with the deafening roar of the larger craft's arcano-engines overpassing every single sound that we could make. As we advanced towards the front of the enemy ship, the sound of an incoming transmission broke the silence we were navigating in.

*"Gunship D6, gunship D6, this is frigate Horizons speaking. Welcome back, comrade Lieutenant Grumman, we were worried about you. What happened down there?"*

"Hi there, Horizons." Avro tried to mimic Grumman's voice. "It was a true hell, but we're back on track. The enemies attacking Neighliss were eliminated and the rest of the missiles were disabled out of caution."

*"You couldn't avoid the attack, though."*

"They were eight, with the traitor DeHavilland leading them. As much as we tried to hold them back, we couldn't avoid one getting into the tower and firing the attack."

*"At least we had time to evacuate Skyhaven. All the population is in the Fleet now, or back at base. Still, you will have to report back to Comrade Commander Ilyushin."*

"Do you think this will get me into trouble?"

*"Maybe. We've sustained heavy losses, although I can understand why you couldn't avoid the missile launch. It was a calculated risk, as far as I know."*

"Thanks for being so understanding." Avro sighed. "Could I ask you a favor? Our gunship took some damage in the takeoff, so I doubt we will make it to the main Fleet. Could we dock the D6 to the Horizons while we repair it?"

*"Of course, Comrade Lieutenant Grumman. We'll begin with the procedures now. Lowering the shields in three, two, one... Shields down."*

"NOW!" Avro yelled. "FIRE AT THE EXPOSED GEMS!"

Avro hit the controls and the D6 made a sharp turn to face the hull and the bridge of the Horizons, while unleashing all the firepower of the small gunship against the weaker spots of the frigate.

*"That flying... IT'S DEHAVILLAND! Alarm! To all the fleet, Grumman is dead and we're under attack by DeHavilland on board of gunship D6! Repeat, frigate Horizons is under attack by gunship D6!"*

I steered my cannon towards the metal hull of the Horizons, aiming at the shield gemstones that stuck out of the walls. The miniguns spewed fire at an amazing rate, covering the red stars on the sides with a myriad of black dots. Without a single instant to rest, I steered the trail of bullets from one gem to the next, causing them to blow in spectacular explosions of bright colors.

"Yes!" Avro stomped the floor. "That got them!"

*“Raise the shields and scramble! Set all the cannons into firing mode!”*

*“Sir, the shields are down!”*

*“All of them?”*

*“I’m afraid that it’s a yes, sir! DeHavilland has left us without defences!”*

*“Fuck that bitch! Reroute all the power into the main engine drive! Get ready to smother them in gunfire, and send the troopers out for a boarding maneuver!”*

*“Aye, aye, sir!”*

“Get ready, you two.” Avro warned. “We’re about to move fast!”

Just an instant before all the guns of the Horizons began firing at our position, Avro pulled the lever of the gunship and we darted upward in a radical climb that almost left me unconscious. While my blood was still relocating in my body, the D6 took a sharp right turn and plummeted down, dodging a stream of bullets and firing a payload of missiles at one of the wings of the frigate. The explosion caused the enemy craft to sway from side to side, and the radio frequency filled with cries of alarm and damage reports.

“YESSSSS!” Avro yelled. “EAT THAT!”

*“Give me a Celestia-damned report!”* The captain of the Horizons yelled.

*“Sir, the right wing is severely damaged! Direct missile strike against the hull, she knew where to hit us!”*

*“Can you do something?”*

*“We are trying, sir!”*

*“Then try harder, for fuck’s sake! Dawnmist, where the hell are you?”*

*“Dawnmist here. Approaching target.”* The voice of a mare, covered in static, replied coldly.

*“I want them disabled or dead now, you hear me, Dawnmist?”*

*“Loud and clear, sir.”*

“OK, you two, they are about to bite the dust, but they’ve sent their onboard troopers to try and hit us from up close! I can’t see them coming, so I’m counting on you to shoot the air from their wings!”

“Understood.” I nodded.

“Perfect! Hold on tight, we’re going for another one!”

The gunship seemed to hit an invisible wall and bounced upward, beginning a loop maneuver, while corkscrewing around its longitudinal axis to let Avro see the frigate from a top-down view. Meanwhile, I fought gravity while trying to make eye contact with the incoming pegasi. At these speeds, it was impossible that my Eyes-Forward Sparkle could locate the threats before they were right upon us. The Horizons was leaning to its damaged side, trying to keep a straight trajectory; but it was clear that it would have to land soon to repair the broken wing.

“Ooh, look at it!” Avro giggled. “It can’t fly straight with that big hole in its wing.”

“Yes, but they’re not done yet.” I replied. “They still can fire.”

“Leave that to me. You take care of those five bandits that are going to cross us right now.”

Right as she was saying that, five bolts of crimson whizzed past our craft, making Avro recoil and sway sideways. As soon as they did that, they performed a sharp turn and tried to get to our tail.

“Don’t let them blow up the engine gemstone! If they do that, we’re fried!” Avro roared.

“No need to say it twice!” Nadyr replied and moved the minigun swiftly.

My companion and I began firing the miniguns at the enemy pegasi that fluttered around us, moving at high speed. Trying to pick such small targets moving at such high speed was very difficult, so we had no other

chance than to spray and pray. Meanwhile, the pegasi fired rounds and missiles back at us, most of them woozing past just by a few centimeters, thanks to Avro's dodging prowess.

"That one went close!" I roared.

"Farsight, you have to shoot them down!" Avro replied.

"I am trying, dammit!"

*"Dawnmist, you're firing at us!"* The captain of the Horizons cried. We were in between the pegasi and the frigate, so all missed shots went straight into the Horizons' hull.

*"Sorry, sir, DeHavilland is a tough target to hit."*

*"So what? That doesn't mean that you have to blow us up!"*

*"Understood, sir! Team, disengage!"*

Dawnmist's team broke the chase and began to overtake us, probably to charge at us head on. Even if fast, their parallel trajectory turned them into viable targets. I followed two of them with the cannon of my minigun and opened fire at them. The hail of bullets hit the couple of pegasi right in the chests of their power armors, piercing them and sending their bodies straight into the abyss.

"Two down!" I roared.

"Two more here!" Nadyr yelled.

"Nice work, you two!" Avro laughed. "Now let's take them out for good!"

*"Dawnmist here! My team has been taken out, repeat, my team has been taken out!"*

*"Disengage, Dawnmist, and return to the Horizons! Crew, set engines at full power and return to the Fleet! NOW!"*

"You're not going anywhere!" Avro replied, and deployed another barrage of missiles.

The first two hit the bridge, in the front end of the top deck, causing a chain reaction of explosions that left the ship without communications or control. The next two landed in the main firing deck, provoking a massive blast of ammo and shrapnel, while the last two hit the engine chamber, blowing the ship up in a blinding pink and blue blast. When the lights faded, the Horizons was no more and Avro pulled the D6 back into a horizontal trajectory.

"OK, that was unbelievable." Nadyr was sweating.

"You did a great job, you two. Considering that it was your first time doing this, I must admit that you managed to handle yourselves like pros. Taking down four pegasi in mid air... damn."

"Well, it's not like you are new to combat flying either..." I replied.

"No, but it is the first time I shoot down a Gale frigate!" Avro laughed. "I had a lot of fun!"

"As fun as it may have been, it was a very close call... How are we going to face an entire fleet?" I asked.

"I thought you were the thinky pony, Farsight..."

"This is not my field of expertise, Avro. It's yours. You built those things, so you should be the one thinking how to blow them up to pieces."

"Well, frigates would be easy to take down one by one. After all, they won't have much more than three or four pegasi in them to intercept. As I told you, most of the Fleet is controlled by computers, to leave the living beings inside focus on other stuff. However, when it comes to bigger ships..."

"Bigger ships?" Nadyr winced. "Like what?"

"Like those coming straight at us..." Avro gulped. "I never thought they would make it here this quick. They must have been closer than what I expected."

In the horizon, the blue of the sky had become clouded with spots of steel grey and red, as a swarm of ships was steadily advancing towards us. Some of the airships that formed the Red Fleet were already known to us, with a dozen of Mystral gunships buzzing around like a cloud of parasprites, and three or four Gale frigates protecting the exposed sides of their bigger counterparts. The rest of the components of Ilyushin's fleet were unknown to us.

The main capital ships were two twin massive hulks of steel and cannons, which even if sleek and pointy, looked more like steady gunning platforms with docking bays than like quick means of traversing the skies. They crawled more than moved, forcing the rest of the airships to lag behind not to break formation, but the incredible amount of firepower they were carrying was simply terrorizing. If one of the shells fired from the main cannons of those behemoths hit the D6, we would be pulverized.

"Those two of the middle are true fortresses." I grunted, as I realized that Avro's story was flimsy. "And one thing's for certain, they weren't meant for peace."

"Yes they are, they were designed as freight carriers. In fact, they're called Stormwind class carriers." Avro shook her head. "Ilyushin had the factories pack as many guns as possible in them."

"Avro, will you cut that out, please?" I grunted. "The Fleet is a war fleet. Gunships, frigates, carriers... all of them are meant to carry weaponry on them. I'm not judging your intentions, my dear, but I would thank you if you would stop lying."

"Farsight, please..."

"No, Avro, stop the charade. I vouched for you in the Council. I got into this war because I love you!" I roared. "The least I can ask for is a bit of honesty. I was waiting for our return but I can't take it anymore!"

"I'm sorry..." Avro sighed sadly. "I should have told you the truth from the very beginning, but the mistrust that your friends had towards me and my kin made me invent that story."

"Listen, Avro, I know what the Enclave did in the past." Nadyr said calmly. "What your former leaders did was terrible, but I've learned to forgive and forget, and so have the most of us. Whatever you did in the Red Front, it wouldn't have mattered to us. At least, I wouldn't have cared at all."

"Please, Avro, be honest for once. Why did you flee?" I asked.

"I didn't get along with Ilyushin. I could understand the need of a Fleet capable of defending itself, while carrying us inside; but there was no way I was going to start a war against those of the surface. We had been defeated before and nearly destroyed, and frankly, I didn't want to find myself in the losing side."

"Fair enough. Was it so hard?" I sighed. So many qualms could have been solved so easily...

"No... in the end, it wasn't. I should have told you the truth the first time I met you."

"Well, never mind. It doesn't matter anymore." I shrugged. "How are we supposed to take those carriers down?"

"Hmm... The best way to do that would be from the inside, by setting the computers to self-destruct."

"Hacking, eh?" I smiled. "That's more like my style."

"We would have to get through those corvettes first, though. Not to mention the frigates and the remaining gunships." Avro grunted.

"I'm guessing that the other ships are the corvettes..."

"Yes, Scirocco class corvettes. Stronger than the frigates, mostly meant for to fend off attacks by smaller craft." Avro chanted. "There's no way we're getting close to the carriers if those corvettes are defending them."

"All the airships have computerized controls, right?" I asked.

"Yes. The crew inside each one will be of between six and ten ponies. The rest is managed by a maneframe."

"Then get me close to one of those frigates and keep the rest of the fleet distracted." I smiled. "It's time to

make some noise.”

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It turned out not to be as simple as I had expected. As soon as we got within range of the Red Fleet, we were welcomed by a true thunderstorm of shelling and gunfire. Avro had no choice than to pull off another one of her gut-churning triple loop-de-loops to avoid getting torn to shreds, and we were forced into an acrobatic chase across the skies. Since my marefriend didn't like to do things the easy way, she decided to begin criss-crossing the firing axes of the larger crafts.

One thing was certain, and that was that the Mystral gunship was reliable and fast. The small airship was able to flip and twist through the narrowest spaces, forcing other gunships and larger crafts to constantly recalibrate their aims. It wasn't so pleasant for us, though, as we were constantly tugged and shaken by the sudden changes in gravity, speed and centrifugal force. Avro, on the other hoof, seemed to be enjoying the ride.

“Woo-hoo!” She cheered. “You can't even see me, you assholes! I've always been the best pilot around!”

“I don't doubt that, my dear...” I grunted. “But we're flying a bit too close to those corvettes, don't you think?”

“It's the only way to stop them from firing!” She replied. “Those explosive shells would wreck their own cannons if we're too close. That's why I keep them at very short range!”

“Can't you just stabilize yourself for a second, so that I can try to board one of them?”

“Are you nuts? As soon as I stop twisting, the rest of the gunships would turn us to smithereens!”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” I roared.

“For the moment, keep firing!” Avro yelled. “I'll try to give you a proper time window to jump onto one of them!”

“Urgh, fine!” I gulped and sent another hail of bullets towards an uncertain point of space.

I was baffled at our own endurance. Being able to recover from a two minute long upside-down trip without having to throw up was something I had absolutely no faith in being able to pull off. However, my body seemed to be willing to prove that it was more than a mere container for my mind. Forcing myself back into the twisting reality, I tried to fix my aim in one of the gunships behind us.

The Mystrals had a clear disadvantage in a firefight, and that was the total lack of shielding. However, they would trump that lack of defences with a brilliant speed and maneuverability, as we were witnessing. Still, when fighting against an enemy of equal characteristics, that advantage was rendered useless, and that was the circumstance I was willing to exploit.

“Avro! Gunship dead on our tail!” I roared. “Stop fluttering for a moment, so that I can have a clear shot!”

“Are you sure you can do it?” She replied.

“Trust me, I only need a moment!”

“Copy that, Farsight!” Avro smiled. “Establishing advance vector in three, two, one... now!”

The constant turning and corkscrewing stopped, and the blurry contours of the Fleet became solid and definite. I saw the Mystral that was trailing us clearly, and aimed my minigun. As soon as the crosshairs merged with the glass cover of the cockpit, I pulled the bite-trigger and the cannon spewed burning death at a rate of a thousand bullets per minute. The enemy ship took most of the hits, and something blew up in the Communist gunship, causing it to break the chase and plummet down in a trail of black smoke.

*“Gunship D11 is down! Repeat, gunship D11 is down!” The radio filled with distress calls and orders.*

*“Who is DeHavilland's gunner? It's the first time that I see a Mystral taken down by minigun fire!”*

*“It's the first time you ever see a Mystral taken down, you stupid cunt! We hadn't engaged in battle before!”*

*“Hey, watch what you say!”*

*“Would you all stop faffing about! It’s just a single gunship! Why can’t you take it down, for Luna’s sake?”*

*“Corvette Heroes here. We have a possible shot, but they’re too close to us. Our shelling would damage the hull and cannons.”*

*“Understood, Heroes. Break formation and try to take them down. Frigates Ouroboros and Treasure, escort the Heroes to new vector.”*

*“Ouroboros here. All clear.”*

*“Treasure here, we copy. Moving to new position.”*

“That’s the answer to our prayers.” Avro giggled. “Two frigates and a corvette, far from the rest of the Fleet! I think your plan is going to work.”

“Great, but won’t the other corvettes fry us as soon as we get into their range?” Nadyr asked.

“Concentrate on the gunships, Nadyr.” Avro whined. “I know exactly how to get this done.”

The Fleet broke in two, as the commander had ordered. A corvette, a three-decker airship that was covered from prow to stern in cannons of the most various calibers, had separated from the group and was trying to gain distance to fire at us safely, with two frigates cautiously keeping its sides guarded. The gunships kept trying to take potshots at us, but after having downed one of them, they stayed at a higher distance, beyond the range of the miniguns. Avro accelerated the D6 and got as close as possible to the Heroes while dodging the attacks from the two escorting frigates.

*“Heroes here. We can’t take a shot, repeat, can’t take a shot. DeHavilland is stuck to us.”*

*“Don’t worry, Heroes. We have this under control. Stop and reroute power to shields. Ouroboros, Treasure, fall back and hold a proper distance.”*

*“Sir, are you going to fire at us?”*

*“No, I’m going to fire at the gunship, but some shells will hit you anyway. It’s a necessary collateral damage. Any complaints, Heroes?”*

*“No, sir. Maximizing shield output now.”*

*“Wonderful. Corvette Starlight, assume firing stance.”*

*“Starlight here. Target locked and ready to fire. Are you prepared, Heroes?”*

*“Go ahead, Starlight.”*

“Errr, Avro... what now?” I asked. “That corvette is about to obliterate us.”

“Now you jump!” Avro groaned and stabilized the gunship, putting it close to the top deck of the corvette.

“What about the shields?”

“They’re designed to stop projectiles at high speed!” Avro replied. “You’ll just pass through unscathed! Now jump before we’re turned to ashes!”

I didn’t need more encouragement to take the risk, as the idea of a hailstorm of explosive shells was really terrifying. I unstrapped myself, took a step back, and prayed to the Goddesses for a safe landing. There was no more time to think, I had to jump in one... two... three!

I leapt into the blue. For a moment, there was nothing more than the wind beneath my body and the thunder of engines and cannons. No gravity, no speed, no notion of risk. I had to thank Ampera for the augments in my hindlegs, as they had allowed me to jump further than what I would have ever expected. I landed on the metallic plating of the top deck, just a second before a massive explosion rocked the whole airship. The volley of fire from the Starlight had just impacted the shields of the Heroes, but there was no apparent damage in the craft. I was already on it, now it was time to get into it.

A hatch allowed me to get into the bowels of the corvette. Inside, everything was plated in dark steel and iron, which reminded me in a sense to the depths of the factories beneath the Platinum Horseshoe. A constant humming filled the air, and propaganda posters of the Red Front were stuck in almost every piece of wall. As if they needed more indoctrination. Every now and then, radio broadcasts broke the silence.

*“The D6 has dodged the attack! What now, sir?”*

*“Gunship D4 here! We think we saw a pony jump onto the Heroes from the D6, is that possible?”*

*“Heroes, confirm that.”*

*“Still no trace of it. We’re searching.”*

*“Frigate Ouroboros here. We believe to have seen that as well.”*

*“Watch out, Heroes. You might have an unwanted passenger.”*

*“Copy that. We’ll spread out and look for intruders.”*

I grabbed my rifle and began to check my E.F.S. carefully. Even if, according to Avro, the crew of the corvette could be of no more than ten pegasi, I wouldn’t like to get caught in a firefight in one of those narrow corridors. The sooner I got to the bridge, the better for me. I wanted to take control of the craft to even up the odds against the Reds, but if I ended up wrecking it, I wouldn’t mind either.

“Are you inside?” Avro’s voice sounded dimmed by static.

“Yes, I’ve boarded the Heroes.”

“Then head for the bridge. It’s on the middle deck, to the front. There’s no way of losing it.”

“Understood.”

“Hey, who’s speaking there?” The voice of a stallion echoed in the hallway. “Intruder!”

**BLAM!**

He didn’t say anything more, as I put a bullet through his unhelmeted head as soon as he popped from around the corner. Such narrow spaces weren’t meant for careful aiming, and I wouldn’t have said no to a proper battle saddle like Avro’s or Ampera’s, but then again, those were the cards I had to play with.

The gunshot would attract the rest of the troops inside the Heroes to my position, so I crawled to a dark corner and got ready to surprise the incoming enemies. Once again, the Fleet communications became hectic, as distress signals were radiated to the rest of the airships.

*“Heroes, we heard gunshots. Reply, Heroes.”*

*“Heroes here. We confirm the gunfire. Enemy on board, repeat, enemy on board. Prepare to execute takeover protocol.”*

*“Denied, Heroes. Try to resist as much as possible. Gunships D8 and D2 are flying to board you.”*

*“Understood. Moving engines to flotation status.”*

*“Gunship D2 here! We’re taking heavy fire from D6, we’re going to have to abort!”*

*“Negative, D2, stay focused on the target.”*

*“We can’t take much long... AAARGH!”*

*“D2! D2! Respond!”*

*“This is gunship D8, D2 has been taken down by D6. Should we change our tactic?”*

*“Negative, D8. Frigates Ouroboros and Treasure, focus on the enemy gunship.”*

*“Understood, sir.”*

My Eyes-Forward Sparkle warned me of the arrival of two more soldiers down the corridor. I squeezed myself into the shadows and hoped that they wouldn’t be wearing their helmets inside the corvette. Luckily

for me, they weren't, and I could see the faces of the Red soldiers that appeared from a side door, trying to catch me from behind. A mare and a stallion, both heavily armed and ready. There was no time to lose, so I activated S.A.T.S. and used that edge to get a clear shot at both the ponies' heads before they could even react.

**BLAM! BLAM!**

The two soldiers fell down before knowing what had hit them. I could see their faces of surprise when they noticed that there was a pony hiding in the dark corner of the corridor, and I couldn't help enjoying it. How many could there be left, though?

"Second Breeze, Second Breeze, come in!" The radio on one of the corpses buzzed.

"Second Breeze will not be able to respond in a while." I replied smugly. "I think it's related to the bullet that went through his head."

"What the...? Who are you?"

"Well, you can call me your hijacker." I laughed. "This is a hostile takeover."

"You'll never capture the ship! Fleet Command, Heroes here, execute takeover protocol!"

*"Negative, Heroes. It's just one pony, take it out."*

"But sir, he's taken out my entire crew!"

*"We can't afford to gun down a corvette if we can recapture it first. Heroes, protocol denied. It's final."*

While the captain of the corvette was speaking with his command, I galloped down the hallways of the airship towards the bridge. I crossed the cannon area of the middle deck, a massive hall of guns controlled by servoengines and robotics, and I walked into the command area, where a nervous pony on a pilot uniform was arguing with the radio. As soon as he heard me enter the room, he turned back and gulped.

"You're never going to take over the Heroes! I will fight you and..."

**BLAM!**

"Oh, shut up already." I groaned.

I moved the corpse of the commander of the Heroes aside and walked towards the terminal that governed the ship. It was another large computer like that of the top of the Spire, with loads of data regarding the damage of the engines, the hull status, the shield generation and the guns. I made myself comfortable and began fiddling with the inputs, feeling better as I began to control the whole massive aircraft with a flick of a switch.

"Time to start the show..." I grinned, and input an order to the main cannons.

A blast rocked the corvette as a volley of explosive shells was fired out of the guns of the Heroes, and several more explosions confirmed that I had hit my intended target. I was going to enjoy that.

*"Sir, this is frigate Ouroboros! The Heroes is firing at us!"*

*"Frigate Treasure here! We've taken heavy damage! Our engines are losing power fast, and we're beginning to fall!"*

*"Shit! SHIT! Ouroboros, report your damage status!"*

*"Shields at 20%, sir. Our targeting systems are down and our engine is not going to take much more punishment!"*

*"Understood. Can you aid the Treasure?"*

*"We'll try, sir!"*

*"Do it, then! Corvettes Starlight and Guise, can you provide firing support?"*

*"Starlight here. Ready to fire at the Heroes."*

*“Guise here. Moving to firing position.”*

*“Command, this is carrier Revolution speaking. We will need escort if the corvettes move to attack.”*

*“Understood, Revolution. Fly in close formation to the Victory and keep your shields up. Frigates New Roam and Wintertrot, advance to escort the carriers.”*

*“New Roam here, orders received and understood.”*

*“Wintertrot here, on the move.”*

The whole Fleet rearranged while the two frigates that had been tailing me began to fall behind, trying to pull off a desperate rescue maneuver. I didn't even flinch when I targeted the Ouroboros' bridge with my rear cannons. A button pressed later, the explosions and the sound of screams coming from the radio made me squeal in delight.

*“Sir, the Ouroboros has been hit! We've lost contact with both frigates, and they're falling down!”*

*“Celestia damn his soul! You at the Heroes, are you listening to me?”*

“Loud and clear.” I replied curtly.

*“You must be DeHavilland's pet, right?”*

“I am many things, but I am no pet. Would a pet take over one of your corvettes and blow up two frigates just by himself?”

*“You perform well, for an insect.”*

“Now I'm an insect?” I winced. “Really? I thought you would show your foe more respect, but I guess I was mistaken.”

*“We show respect for those who are worthy of it. Traitors and their friends are not regarded with pleasure among the ranks of the Communist Pegasi Front.”*

“Too bad that you are so narrow minded. I will show you who you're dealing with.”

I closed the channel with the Fleet Command, and concentrated on thinking what to do next. My shields were taking a beating from the shells of the other two corvettes, so I could not stop to plan my upcoming move. That battle required bold and careless actions, and I was ready to carry them forward.

“Farsight!” Avro called from the gunship. “Did you do that?”

“Yes, call me captain Farsight of the corvette Heroes.” I laughed. “On a second thought, don't do that.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I want to bring the fight to the big ships.”

“Farsight, even a corvette can't do much against the plating of those carriers. I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Believe me, it will be.” I grinned. “I just need you to give those two frigates something else to worry about.”

“Understood.” Avro said calmly. “Don't risk it too much, my dear, we've got them in a pinch.”

I sighed and began rerouting the power from the cannons to the engines. To get my plan working properly, I needed a boost of speed that would give me a chance to surprise the commander of the Red Fleet. As soon as my guns went silent and the corvette began to move at a noticeable pace, I changed the course to head towards one of the carriers, the Revolution. It was an incredible piece of engineering, six decks of cannons and gunner posts, with docking bays for smaller ships and a large launchpad in the top deck for gunships. A large red star with a golden wreath beneath it decorated the side hulls of the gigantic craft.

*“Sir, the Heroes has stopped firing!”*

*“Yes, so what?”*

*"I don't know what they're up to!"*

*"Guise, I don't give a damn about what they're going to do. As long as they're not firing at us, we can try to mow them down. And that is what you should be doing!"*

*"Yes, sir!"*

*"Command, this is frigate Wintertrot! Gunship D6 has caused us some severe damage, we must fall back!"*

*"Negative, Wintertrot. Hold your positions. New Roam, move to engage gunship D6."*

*"What about the Heroes, sir?"*

*"Victory, Revolution! Can you get a firing vector at the Heroes?"*

*"Certainly, sir."*

*"You heard it, New Roam. Aid the Wintertrot against that bloody gunship!"*

*"Yes, sir!"*

The guns of the two carriers, which had been silent until that very moment, began firing straight at me. As I could notice, the shields in the front end of the corvette were weaker, as some explosions began to shake the Heroes quite violently, and reports of damage appeared in the screens. While the hull could take the beating, my plan would work.

*"Farsight, you're taking heavy damage!"* Avro cried.

*"Avro, I know what I'm doing, so concentrate on giving those frigates hell!"*

*"But darling..."*

Another explosion stopped me from hearing Avro's last sentence, and I realized that I had to charge head on if I wanted the plan to work. I put all the power into the engine, neglecting the shields, and prayed for the best.

*"The Heroes has lowered its shields!"*

*"Shoot it down, then!"*

*"Starlight here, can't do, sir. It's too close to the carriers."*

*"Victory, Revolution! Can you eliminate the target?"*

*"Revolution here! We're firing at it with all we got, but it's taking them all like a champ!"*

*"What is he doing? He's going straight at you!"*

*"Watch out, Revolution, he's going to ram you!"*

*"Evacuate the portside area, quick!"*

I could almost see the faces on the Red troopers inside the Revolution when the prow of the corvette crashed violently against the hull of the enemy airship, causing many cannons to explode in a maelstrom of fire and metal. The force of the crash threw me to the ground, but since the bridge of the corvette was far from the front end, I came out of it rather unharmed. Leaving the airship stuck into the side hull of the carrier, I galloped to the open and crawled through the tight space in the crash area.

Inside the carrier, everything was pretty much the same as in the corvette, maybe bigger and brighter, but that could be a side effect of the many raging fires inside the ship. Chaos was loose in the Revolution, as alarm bells rang and orders were shouted out of every speaker in the six decks.

*"Everypony head for the bridge! We must defend it at all costs! Repeat, everypony to the bridge!"*

*"Avro, you hear that?"* I smiled.

*"You are just out of your mind, Farsight! Crashing into another airship like that? Do you have a deathwish?"*

*"It was the only way to get into the carrier!"*

“Fine, fine, what matters is that you’re alive and well.” Avro sighed. “What do you want?”

“Could you guide me to the maneframe? They won’t let me use the bridge.”

“Go down to the last deck. It should be right beneath your position, but there will be automated defences.”

“I will deal with them.”

“Be careful, will you?”

“I will, Avro, I will.”

I galloped down the metallic hallways to the lower levels of the carrier. I was ready to face any foe, but it seemed that those troopers that hadn’t been wiped out by the explosion had followed orders and were entrenched in the bridge of the Revolution. I entered the maneframe room quickly, and the E.F.S. warned me immediately of enemy forces in the area. I dove behind one of the server towers and took a peek around the corner, just to be aimed at by two mechanic turrets.

“Well, here you are.” I groaned and took aim. The turrets sent a round of laser fire against me, and I swore I smelled charred mane right before I recoiled. They were really fast.

“Crap, they’re fast.”

*“The turrets in the maneframe room have detected something, sir!”*

*“Go investigate!”*

*“Yes, sir!”*

“Dammit!” I grunted and activated S.A.T.S. I couldn’t waste any time dealing with the turrets.

**BLAM! BLAM!**

The automated guns exploded in a flurry of sparks and metal bits, and I galloped to the maneframe backup terminal. Hacking it would take me some time, and I would be defenceless until I managed to break the code barriers that separated me from controlling the ship.

“Avro, I’m at the maneframe, but they’ve detected me!” I called through the radio. “Can you give them something to worry about?”

“Sure, Farsight!”

Suddenly, a series of explosions shook the entire airship from side to side. Avro must have unloaded a whole payload of missiles against the Revolution, which even if useless, would distract the troopers inside while I grasped control of the craft.

*“It’s the D6 again!”*

*“Sir, we’re out of shields, if the gunship lands another series of missiles we are going to be in trouble!”*

*“Fine, scramble! I’ll try to keep him off our system.”*

“I’d like to see you do that.” I smiled and pressed a button on my PipBuck. With a faint beep, I took control of the Revolution. “Ta-ta!”

*“The fuck? I’ve lost control! Repeat, I’ve lost control of the Revolution!”*

*“Understood! We’re returning to the carrier!”*

“Avro, I’ve got them pinned down.” I smiled. “Get away from here, now!”

“Got it!”

I browsed through the options that appeared in the terminal and selected the fire control, aiming all cannons at the other carrier, the Victory. When all signals went green with lock-on, I ordered them to fire at will. The massive roar of the large carrier cannons filled the air in a dissonant symphony that made me prance in glee. Once again, the echoing destruction was responded by another lot of radio communications.

*“This is the Victory, we’re taking heavy damage!”*

*“Victory, report!”*

*“The Revolution has started firing at us! We couldn’t raise our shields in time!”*

*“Revolution, what the hell is going on?”*

*“Somepony has hacked into our maneframe, sir!”*

*“What? How can an intruder do that?”*

*“He... he rammed a corvette into our hull!”*

*“He did WHAT?”*

*“Command, this is the Victory! We’ve lost our engines! Repeat, we have lost our engines! We’re going down!”*

*“Can you evacuate, Victory?”*

*“Negative, sir, the gunships have been destroyed in the explosion!”*

*“Revolution, what about your gunships?”*

*“They’re already airborne, sir. Redirecting them to aid the Victory.”*

*“Command, come in! This is the Starlight.”*

*“Starlight, we’re listening, what is it?”*

*“Should we fire at the Revolution?”*

*“Negative, Starlight.”*

*“But Command, it’s under enemy control!”*

*“I don’t care! We still have troops in the ship, and they’re only facing one enemy! We must try to recapture it!”*

*“I refuse, sir!”*

*“Starlight, Guise, return to base. We must try to save whatever we can.”*

*“Understood, Command. Starlight setting retreat vector.”*

I laughed and pranced, enjoying our victory against the entire Communist Fleet. Our joint ability had taken down almost the whole of the enemy forces, counting just with a small gunship on our side. I heard Avro cheering through the radio, while the last remnants of the Red forces wailed in angst and pain as the Victory plummeted to the ground. No matter what came in the future, we had dealt a killing blow to Ilyushin’s plans of taking over New Pegasus.

*“That was simply awesome, darling!” Avro giggled.*

*“Well, I can’t even believe it myself.”*

*“Me neither.” Nadyr yelled in the background.*

*“It was a surprise to all of us, yes, but now I have to think how to get out of here.”*

*“What about the troops that remain in the Revolution?”*

*“Oh, yes, almost forgot about them.” I coughed. “We’ll have to give them a proper ending, shouldn’t we?”*

*“A proper ending?”*

*“Avro, I will need your skill once more. What’s the best way to abandon the carrier quickly?”*

*“I guess it would be the launchpad at the top deck, but... you don’t have a gunship.”*

*“Who says I need a gunship?”*

“Farsight, you’re not meaning you are going to...”

“Keep an eye on the Revolution, will you?”

I shut down the communication with my companions and returned to the terminal. A few clicks and taps later, I was looking at the last stepping stone in that battle. I pressed a button and the whole airship was lit in red flashing lights.

*“Self-destruct sequence activated. Three minutes until the explosion.”*

*“What? Self-destruction? You disgusting son of a...”*

*“Sir, you need to evacuate the Revolution!”*

*“No way! A captain stays in his ship!”*

*“But sir!”*

*“Return to base, it’s an order!”*

*“Negative sir, we’re helping you out of there.”*

I ignored the radio chatter and galloped as fast as I could to reach the top deck. The Revolution was a massive airship, and if I had known that I would have to get so far, I would have given myself a couple more minutes. The alarm lights dyed the metal red and the constant horn sound was deafening, but I forced myself to run faster. My life depended on it.

*“Two minutes to the explosion.”*

I jumped to avoid a crashed catwalk over the third firing deck. My improvised arrival at the carrier had caused some of the passageways to be blocked or crumbled, so I had to crawl and roll to get through the narrow spots that remained open. My heart was beating at an incredible rate, faster than I had ever heard it, as I climbed the stairs into the final deck of the Revolution. It was escape or death.

*“One minute to the explosion.”*

The launchpad deck was a large open runway that stretched into the blue void. Some pegasi had arrived at the side of the landing area and wondered whether to shoot me or to aid their captain, who was still on the bridge. Before giving them a chance to decide, I galloped towards the far end of the runway, counting the seconds before the explosion. Ten... nine... eight... I was not going to make it... or was I... six... five... The end was right there... three... two... one...

I jumped.

\*\*\* \*\*

**BOOOOOOOM!!!**

The blast acted like a thrust downward, accelerating my fall. Gravity pulled my body towards the ground, and the air caressed my fur as I plummeted and rolled in a fight to regain control of my body. The whole world turned around me at great speed, and in a matter of seconds up was down and down was up. The noise of the wind at my ears didn’t let me hear the radio, so I had no idea about where Avro was.

On one of the many twists and turns, I got a glimpse of two armored pegasi that had begun a chase from the falling, burning ruins of the Revolution, which were being held from falling thanks to the last breaths of the magic gems on the lower end of the hull remnants. The Red troopers that followed me in my fall had vengeance written all over their faces, and they posed a more believable threat than that of the ground, which was still far, even if closing in quickly.

“Persistent little bastards...” I groaned.

I tried to summon my rifle, but I was moving too quickly for my magic to even be able to grip it properly, so I had no choice than to try and dodge their attacks. I held little hopes of being capable of actually performing any controlled moves, what meant that I was at their mercy.

“Avro, where are you?” I sighed.

Suddenly, the rolling sound of minigun fire came out of the blue, and the two pegasi were mowed down by a gunship that passed by me at high speed. I was able to get a glimpse of the marking on the side of the craft, where a familiar number six made me smile. Not a minute too soon!

“Farsight!” Nadyr’s voice roared above the reigning noise. “Pull yourself in!”

Avro was maintaining the gunship parallel to my firing trajectory, with its side gates wide open. I rolled to the side and stretched my muzzle to try and grab one of the bites inside the craft. It took me a couple of failed attempts to get it done, but I managed to hold tight to the plummeting gunship.

“Is he aboard?” Avro yelled.

“We got him!” Nadyr replied.

At the half-zebra’s response, the pegasus pulled the control lever of the D6 and the gunship performed a strong recovery, sending me flank-first into the metallic floor of the aircraft. Without wasting any more time, I strapped myself tight and gasped for air. All those thrills had me about to have a heart attack.

“Farsight, are you alright?” Avro asked.

“Yes...” I huffed and panted. “More or less intact.”

“Wonderful!” Avro squeed. “You’re the best, Farsight.”

“Thank you, honey.” I sighed, and sat on my flanks. “Thank you.”

“What now?” Nadyr asked. “Do we get to return home? We’ve kicked their flanks for good.”

“Not yet.” Avro frowned. “We haven’t defeated Ilyushin.”

“Well, where is he?”

“If I know him right, he must be hiding in Breakeven Point.”

“What the hell is that?”

“Our main base. We must get there before the Starlight and the Guise. If we don’t... we won’t stand a chance.”

#

Note: Perk Added

Wingless Pegasus: +10% Strength and Gun skills when fighting airborne.

## Chapter 22: Tainted Love

*“Hello there, and welcome to another evening of music and entertainment in your all-time favourite station, New Pegasus Radio, the home of the classics that have outlived the Apocalypse! I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, being your faithful companion in all those lonely hours. We’ve been listening to another set of great pieces by the wonderful Velvet Remedy, the Songbird of the Wasteland, recorded live at Tenpony Tower, Manehattan. What a wonderful singer she is, isn’t she? Even at her age, she keeps being as sweet and powerful as she was in her first hits. It’s always a pleasure to put a record in the player and to listen to those soft and welcoming tunes, I tell you that!*

*Now, now, news! It’s time to bring you the latest stuff that has been happening in New Pegasus and the Wasteland! You know, things are beginning to stir up in town. Ever since that pegasus landed in our city, the apparent calm and stability that reigned has been substituted by a constant tension and strife. The head of the City Council, Farsight, is nowhere to be seen and some of the members of the Board have begun to question the correctness of his decisions. Even though the spokespony Desert Rose keeps trying to maintain an image of unity and cohesion, there is no doubt that things don’t go so well in the local Government.*

*Outside, the War still rages, but with a totally new and unexpected situation that has caught us totally by surprise: many travelling Wastelanders have mentioned a massive battle in the skies above the Neighvada Desert, with airships being blown apart and falling into the red sands. The City Board has sent scouting and scavenging parties to the wreckage, with the hope of being able to hoard some of the technology that those dreadnoughts were carrying. Who was this mysterious faction? Which was the force that took them down?*

*My thoughts on this are that we weren’t alone beneath the cloud cover. The skies have always held secrets to us bound to earth, and those mysteries have been unveiled to us with the opening of the clouds. As far as we know, there could be another war raging in the heavens, a conflict in which we could get involved if we don’t act carefully. The role of the City Council should be to keep a stance of neutrality and peace in all fronts possible, although I fear that some of those fronts will be hard to maintain.*

*I said this, because the situation in Hooper Dam is beginning to look grim for the Republican forces in the East bank. Reinforcements from the Tsardom have started to push the NER troops back into the Dam by means of raw ponypower, sustaining great losses in the process. Obviously, the Tsar doesn’t care too much about his casualty rate, but there’s no denying that it’s giving him the results he wanted.*

*In response to such moves, the NER has doubled the rate of reinforcement in the West bank, in an attempt to choke the Tsardom troops in firepower when they set hooves in the facility. Apart from that, there are plenty of rumours of a second Army of the Republic attempting an attack from the North, which would imply crossing the river into enemy territory. It’s nothing more than gossip that flows through the Wasteland, and it could perfectly be a diversion, but we must take it into account given the many times that we have listened that very idea in the last day. We’ll keep our eyes and ears open to find out more about the status of the conflict.*

*And once again, that is all for the hour, so let’s return to some more music! In dire times like these, what we need is something to cheer us up, and I know exactly what we’re looking for. Are you thinking what I am thinking? Of course, it’s time for a bit more of Vinyl Scratch to light up the night! Get ready to shake those hooves to the beat, and enjoy this day just as if it were the last one! And remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly to your hearts!”*

The arcano-engine of the small gunship wailed as we flew through the desert at full speed, making the little craft rattle and shake with every small turbulence we went through. The air howled through the open side gates, making it impossible to speak inside the cabin. Not that we were in a talking mood, though. Avro clutched the controls tightly and drove the ship to the very limit of its capacity to outrun the two remaining Red corvettes into their base in a place called Breakeven Point. The reflection of her beautiful face showed her utter concentration while she kept her eyes to the data screens of the D6, since there was no way anypony could see a thing outside, considering how fast we flew. Meanwhile, I felt as if my internal organs had been

placed in a hydraulic press. Ponies were not meant to be subjected to such accelerations, that was for certain; and judging from Nadyr's face, I believe he thought the same.

I had a sinking feeling, though. For the first time in many years, I had the sensation that I wasn't being the one pulling the strings. Instead, I was being driven into a situation I had no control over. It felt like being dragged into the middle into the middle of a massive maelstrom, while being incapable of getting away and knowing that it could rip me apart. I knew that Avro had gotten me into that situation, but I still couldn't see why she had done it. From all the ponies I had come across, she had been the first one I hadn't been able to see through. It was frustrating, and at the same time, alluring. Everything surrounding her was shrouded in a haze of mystery; making me want to unveil it.

We had been buzzing through the Neighvada skies for almost an hour, heading towards the sunset. The name of the Communist base didn't appear in any of the maps uploaded into my PipBuck, so I had simply no idea of where we were flying to, but considering the direction we had chosen, it had to be close to the Divide. Maybe the best choice was to ask...

"Avro, darling, could you tell us where we're going?" I yelled over the noise.

"I already told you: Breakeven Point!" Avro replied without turning.

"Yes, Breakeven Point, I know. But where is this place exactly? It doesn't appear in any map!"

"It was never meant to! It's our secret base, after all!"

"Right, right... Anyway, since you're taking us there, you might want to enlighten us about its whereabouts. Is it close to the Divide?"

"Wrong. It's IN the Divide."

"In the Divide? I thought it was some sort of uncrossable barrier." Nadyr scowled.

"You don't know what the Divide is, do you?" Avro giggled.

"I thought it was some sort of steep mountain ridge that couldn't be traversed, with a hell of a lot of radiation added to the mix." I shook my head. "But judging from your words, I think that it is something completely different to all that."

Avro smiled, while keeping her eyes on the control panel.

"As always, Farsight, you always get the ideas at the first glance. Indeed, the Divide is not what you thought it is, but you're not all that far away from reality. It is a mountain ridge, but what makes it so dangerous is not the radiation or the potential fall down a cliff."

"Then what is it?" Nadyr groaned.

"All the area is constantly ravaged by massive storms. The winds would rip the flesh off your bones in a matter of seconds."

"I don't like the sound of that." Nadyr gulped.

"Me neither." I shook my head. "Let me guess, though. I believe that those storms are not natural."

"Not bad, darling, not bad!" Avro laughed. "Those storms are a magical phenomenon, but they have a very simple explanation. Before the War, the Equestrian Government built several megaspell launching facilities all along the ridge that separated Neighvada from the rest of Equestria. Since this place was a bit of a hinterland in the pony-zebra war, the High Command in Canterlot believed that those launchpads would stay hidden to enemy eyes until they fired a surprise attack against the striped ones. No offence, Nadyr."

"Never mind, carry on." Nadyr shook his head.

"As I was saying, these military emplacements had to be kept secret, but every war has its traitors, and somehow, the zebra army found out about the location of the ridge facilities. According to some intercepted transmissions, they had no intention of bombing Neighvada, since it was a worthless patch of land with little resources and no strategic interest, but as soon as they found out about what the pony army had set up in the

mountains, they sent a whole barrage of balefire bombs to clean the area of threats.”

“And the bombs caused the storms? It’s an odd side effect.”

“Not the bombs by itself, but the chain reaction of balefire magic and megaspell technology. Somehow, the resulting blast is still raging, and the two magic forces feed each other to cause a constant turmoil at high speeds. What you have is a terrible storm as a result.”

“I see. Then how is it possible that you might have a base in Breakeven Point, if the magic forces in the area are so deadly?”

“You know that the name isn’t coincidental, right? It’s called like that because at that point, all the forces nullify each other, creating a point where it’s safe to stay. Somehow, it seems like the Equestrians knew it, because they built a bunker complex in the very spot.”

“I simply can’t believe that they could be expecting a balefire bomb attack.” I winced.

“I don’t think they were, either.” Avro nodded in agreement. “However, I suppose they considered the chance of a malfunction or something similar. That’s the only rational explanation.”

“Maybe they were lucky, that’s all.” Nadyr grinned.

“That’s too much of a coincidence to owe it to luck only.” I shook my head. “Too many variables just to roll the dice.”

“I agree.” Avro said coldly. “The location of Breakeven Point is too... perfect, too tailored to have been left to chance.”

“Fine, fine...” Nadyr mumbled. “Just one question, Avro... how do you know all this? I had no idea about what the Divide actually was, and I would say that Farsight didn’t know either.”

“You do realize that we pegasi left the War after the fall of Cloudsdale, do you?”

“Yes, so what?”

“From that point on, we were observers. We lived our lives, rebuilt our homes and kept advancing; but we always had an eye looking down to the ground. One could never know when the earthlings would manage to start rebuilding the world they had burnt to ashes.”

“That didn’t stop you from being defeated.” I smiled cunningly.

“Indeed, it didn’t. Then again, there were others in charge, or so I was told. I was too young to even remember.”

“Avro...” I said. “Still, that doesn’t explain how you know all that information about the pre-War past.”

“My kin duplicated a lot of archives through the entire pegasus network. Even if our bases were destroyed, we could keep our data safe. That’s how I learnt all this.”

“Really...” I sighed. “Now that you mention the destruction of your bases, how is it that the cloud cover in Neighvada wasn’t affected by the Light Bringer’s action?”

“That is something we have never had clear enough. We believe it stayed there because the Divide acted as a magic deflector. There was no chance to prove it, but it stays as the most accepted hypothesis.”

“You have your point there.” I nodded.

“Glad to hear you think that.” Avro giggled. “Any more questions?”

“I do have one.” I said. “Why did you have to occupy a pre-War military base, if you lived perfectly up there? I mean, you had a cloud cover protecting you, and if it hadn’t been for Ilyushin, we wouldn’t have been forced to blow it apart.”

“It was Ilyushin’s doing alright!” Avro stomped the floor. “It was his decision to make our move into the base, in order to occupy it and to use it for our military purposes. We used it as a drydock to build the largest of our ships, as well as to improve our weaponry. Have you ever witnessed the effect of an arcano-engine

being tested in the Divide?”

“Let me guess... a beam of wind that cuts through all Neighvada from West to East?”

“Exactly.”

“We call them Divide Storms. I never thought they could have such an origin.” Nadyr whistled.

“I had the feeling that they were unnatural to a point.” I nodded. “Now I have proof. Tell me one more thing, Avro. If you disagreed with Ilyushin’s way of handling things, why didn’t you rebel earlier? You worked in the construction of an entire fleet, on the perfecting of your guns and armor, and you weren’t able to see through his intentions? Oh, and Avro, please be honest from the very beginning.”

“Are you implying I’m a liar?” Avro yelled.

“No, darling, but you haven’t been telling me the whole truth; and considering we’re going deep into enemy territory, I would like you to be totally sincere with me.”

“Fine... I have to warn you of one thing, Farsight. Ilyushin can be really... persuasive when he wants to. He is a master of speech, and has a close to supernatural charisma. He came out of nowhere, and managed to convince us that we had to embrace his ideology and follow his lead. He promised glory and welfare, retribution and happiness, and he did it in such an enthralling way that we believed him and cheered. We turned him into our leader without asking questions, and did his bidding in the firm belief that it was the best for us. He used us for his purposes, and he keeps doing that with all the rest of my kin.”

“A kin that you intend to liberate, right?” I snickered.

“Don’t take it so lightly!” Avro huffed.

“I’m not taking it lightly, my dear. It’s just that it sounds incoherent to act as the liberator of the pegasi when we’re fresh out of a battle in which we have destroyed the vast majority of their fleet, causing them quantious casualties.”

“Those were soldiers who devoted their lives to Ilyushin’s ideals. As much as I regret seeing them die, there’s little we can do, if they’re so convinced of what they’re fighting for. I know how I felt for him... so I can picture how the rest of the pegasi see their Commander. This will not be a matter of reasoning, I tell you. Either we take Ilyushin out or we will have to face all his army.”

“That’s a classic. Take a leader out and the followers will disband.” Nadyr cooed.

“Exactly.” Avro nodded.

I sighed. Even if my beloved one’s explanations seemed much more straightforward and clear, there was something slightly off about them. Something that still didn’t fully click, something that warned me about a possible lie... It could be me, after all. Considering how many times she had changed her story, I had grown a bit suspicious of every word she said. In the very deep, I wanted to trust her, but there was something nagging in the back of my mind, a constant warning that sunk me in a state of discomfort.

“What’s wrong, Farsight?” Avro asked. “You seem concerned about something.”

“Meh... nevermind.” I waved a hoof dismissively.

“Honey, when you’re worried about something, then it means business. Would you tell us what it is?”

“It’s a bit of a bad feeling, really. I can’t tell what it is, but my gut is warning me of something.” I was glad Avro couldn’t look at me, she would have clearly seen that I was lying. “Maybe it’s just that I don’t like going into an enemy military base without knowing what we might face.”

“Believe me, it won’t be tougher than taking out their fleet. Take it easy, Farsight, we’ve been through the hardest.”

“I guess you’re right, Avro. I’m just being a bit too dramatic...”

“Nuuuh.” Nadyr moaned. “You’re just being yourself, bro. The only difference is that after eight years of being on the top, you’ve forgotten how it feels to be in a tight spot.”

“I disagree.” I shook my head. “What about the battle we’ve just come out of? That was a really difficult one, and I didn’t feel like that.”

What do you know, lies to cover more lies. If this trip took longer than expected, I would end up telling Avro that I didn’t trust her, and that was something I didn’t want to happen.

“I wouldn’t take that one into account.” Nadyr laughed. “We were so full of adrenaline that we didn’t realize what we were doing. Come to think of it, we should have been scared as hell, but we weren’t!”

“You have a point there, Nadyr. That will probably be the reason.” Thanks, my striped companion, for saving my ass there.

“No problem, bro!” Nadyr smiled. “By the way, Avro, how long until we get to the base?”

“Almost there!” Avro cheered. “Be sure to hold on to something tightly, because the last part of the ride is going to be bumpy!”

“More or less bumpy than the takeoff?” I asked, remembering how badly we had been shaken.

“It depends, really.”

“On what?”

“On whether the Guise and the Starlight will have made it to Breakeven Point. In that case, they’ll be waiting, and the base defence system will be fully operational. That will definitely be a shaky ride. If we get there before the two corvettes, well, I expect to be able to whizz in before they even ready the flak guns.”

“I guess that by whizzing in you mean getting into the base at full speed, right?” I gulped.

“Yes, that’s the point. Do you understand why I’m telling you to hold on tight?”

“I get it, I get it!” I grumbled and looked to the latches. They were all in place. “I’m locked.”

“Me too!” Nadyr replied.

“Then prepare yourselves! We’re about to enter the Divide!”

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We felt it before we even got to see it. The small gunship began vibrating, then it started shaking more and more violently as Avro drove it into the magical storms of the everlasting barrier. Soon, the entire craft was being hurled from one side to the other, and any sign of controlled flight was lost as the might of the wind seemed to overcome the power output of the arcano-engine. My beloved pegasus seemed to keep things under control, since she didn’t even flinch when the storm engulfed us whole.

The endless blue skies of the Neighvada Desert had been covered by thick red clouds, towering masses of crimson, that shifted their shapes and dashed through the open air, moved by the magic-induced winds that rendered all the area a Wasteland within a Wasteland. There was something evil about those clouds, though. Their red tone could be produced by the sand, but their massiveness was unnatural. If I was not mistaken, clouds needed water to grow, but there was very little water in the area, almost close to none. Therefore, those blood-red hulks had to be a construct of magic.

The howling wind entered through the open side gates of the D6, pushing us to one side, then to the other, while the red sand scratched our coats and got into our nostrils. Nadyr began to cough and I was having a hard time keeping my eyes open. Avro, on the other hoof, didn’t seem to be too affected by the effects of the storm.

“Avro!” I coughed. “Are you sure you’re on the right path? We’re about to be smothered by the sand!”

“Oh, yes, sorry about that, I had to take a little detour, just in case the corvettes had arrived!” Avro giggled.

“That’s why I’ve had to get you through the storm for a little while. Are you alright back there?”

“I’ve got sand in my nose, Avro!” Nadyr huffed and coughed. “You could have told us before, I would have covered my face!”

“I am going to need some serious cleaning after this, darling.” I hissed. “I’m feeling sandy in places I had never imagined. Not to mention how strained I feel after all those twists and bumps!”

“We’re almost out of it!” Avro smiled. “Be patient!”

“Yes, but how long will it take?” I roared over the constant rumble.

“Just a minute!”

“I don’t know if we’ll be able to…”

Suddenly, the rumbling stopped and we were spewed out of the maelstrom of sandstorms and eldritch forces, and the gunship flew straight over a patch of blue sky surrounded by the rest of the storm. It was a very strange sight indeed, seeing the world enclosed by a constant wall of red sand clouds that kept raging with all their might, while we were in a state of total calmness. Not even the slightest breeze blew in the area, making it feel like a singularity, something that was a bit out of the ordinary.

“This is it, folks, Breakeven Point!” Avro cheered.

“I see…” I gasped, coughing sand. “Where’s the base?”

“Look down!”

I did as the pegasus told me, and while I was sticking my sand-covered head out of the gunship’s gate, I couldn’t help to open my muzzle in awe. Below us, the mountain ridge had been excavated to form a gigantic gaping hole, a cylinder of concrete and rock that tunneled into the bowels of the world. Judging from the size of the facility, even the largest of the Red ships could fit into it. I pictured the Victory and the Revolution coming out of that immense hole in their maiden voyages, and I felt suddenly small. What were we facing?

“Holy Celestia…” I groaned. “That place is immense!”

“It is big, that’s for sure!” Avro laughed. “But most of it is just an empty drydock. Skyhaven was our main base.”

“Which we blew up.” Nadyr smiled.

“Precisely.”

“Then what’s the plan?” I asked. “You’re the one that knows the place, after all.”

“The plan is to find Ilyushin and kill him. You can’t get simpler than that.”

“Should we expect resistance?”

“I don’t think so… I believe the corvettes are still en route. If that’s so, all that will be left in the base are workers and technicians. They can handle a gun, but I don’t think they’ll give us much of a fight. I wouldn’t in their place, really.”

“It depends… how devoted are they to Ilyushin’s cause? You said that he’s very persuasive.”

“He is, but trust me, I know those techies quite well. They are ponies of reason. Prove them that you’re more valuable for them than their leader, and they will follow you.”

“Won’t your friend do anything about it?” Nadyr asked.

“First, he’s not my friend.” Avro growled. “Second, if the Guise and the Starlight haven’t made it to the base, he will only have a hoofful of personal guards at his disposal. It would be fairly unwise to send them against us.”

“I agree.” I nodded and scratched my muzzle. “I think I have a plan.”

“Really? Enlighten us!” Avro cheered.

“To begin with, I am assuming that the remnants of the Communist Fleet haven’t made it into the base. If that happens to be the case, we should try to get to the outer defence control center, in order to give the corvettes a proper welcome.”

“I see where you’re going.” Avro giggled.

“Of course you are.” I sneered. “It’s not like it’s a very convoluted idea. Once the last forces have been taken out, we should try to convince the non-combatants to join our side; or if we can’t achieve that, at least avoid them from teaming up with Ilyushin.”

“Believe me, if everything goes as planned, they’ll love to work for you.”

“I prefer to see that with my own eyes.” I shook my head. “Anyway, the last step should be to take Ilyushin down once and for all.”

“I can’t wait for that to happen.” Avro smiled.

“Me neither.” Nadyr huffed. “I want to get back to good old New Pegasus in one piece. I’ve had enough adventures for now.”

“Just wait a little longer, Nadyr.” I said calmly. “This war is about to end.”

“Damn sure it is!” Avro stomped the gunship floor. “We’re ready to enter, so get ready. This might be a bit harsh if the turrets are functional!”

The pegasus handled the controls and began a descending spiral into the entrance of Breakeven Point base. The three of us held our breath as the gaping hole drew closer, fearing a possible attack by the pegasi in the facility. Nadyr and I held our miniguns tightly, ready to open fire; but considering what Avro had said, there would be little to be done in case the turrets began firing. My heart pounded stronger and stronger as the distance between us and our destination diminished, up to the point that I felt it wanting to rip off my chest.

“Can’t you get in a bit faster?” Nadyr screamed. “We’re playing sitting ducks here!”

“I have to get in like this! If I try to plummet in, I will have no time to brake!” Avro replied.

“What about the larger ships?” I asked.

“Those have vertical takeoff systems built into them. It’s the only way they can get out of this base. The gunships, on the other hoof, being so small and nimble, don’t require such mechanisms.”

“I understand.” I nodded.

“It’s strange that they haven’t fired yet.” Avro wondered. “Maybe the corvettes are still away.”

“Maybe Lady Luck is on our side for once.” I smiled. “We should get in as fast as possible.”

“Almost there...” Avro grinned. “Don’t start gunning us down now...”

The gunship whizzed past the entrance of the base, and we sunk into the neonlit depths of the mountains, spiralling down a silo of concrete and steel, profusely decorated with the red stars of the Communist Front. The turrets hadn’t fired a single round at us, so the place was either empty or they hadn’t noticed us getting in. Frankly, I didn’t believe that we had been able to fly unnoticed; and there were clear signs that the place was inhabited. The radio hummed with military anthems and I could hear the hissing of a hydraulic door opening somewhere in the facility. Avro landed on the bottom end of the silo, close to some other gunships, and we hopped out of the craft. Personally, I felt happy to be back on the ground.

“I can’t believe that we haven’t sparked any alert.” I grumbled.

“It wouldn’t surprise me too much.” Avro replied. “If Fleet Command is in constant communication with the two corvettes, it could be possible that a single gunship would have flown past their detection systems.”

“That, or they are waiting for us.” I mumbled.

“I don’t think so.” Avro smiled. “I think I’ve sneaked through their radars.”

“No you haven’t.”

I summoned my rifle as I turned, getting ready to face a myriad of armored enemies. The voice of a confident, young stallion had surprised us; and I feared that all our plan could have gone awry from the very first step. Taking a deep breath, I looked up from the ground, and instead of seeing dozens of armored

troopers, I found myself facing a lone pegasus dressed in a dirty jumpsuit, with his turquoise mane and olive fur making a harsh contrast with the smeared orange fabric. Our new acquaintance wore round glasses and a utility belt around his waist, which brought back memories of my first days in Freedom Field.

“Petlyakov, you sneaky bastard!” Avro grinned.

“Avro DeHavilland in the flesh!” The pegasus named Petlyakov smiled as well. “It’s so good to see you in one piece.”

“Your brother wouldn’t make it easy, you know.”

“Yes, my brother can be a very nasty pony.” Petlyakov sighed. “Still, Avro, you know that we were always on your side.”

“Thanks, Pet.”

“You’re welcome, Av.”

“Excuse me, Av.” I mimicked ironically. “Would you introduce us, please? I’ve already assumed that he’s friendly, but I’m feeling a bit sidestepped here.”

“Of course, where are my manners. My name is Petlyakov, chief researcher here at Breakeven Point, and incidentally, brother of Ilyushin. Everypony calls me Pet, though. Avro and I have worked side by side for a long time, before all of this happened.”

“Nice to meet you.” I shook his hoof. “I am Farsight, leader of New Pegasus and Avro’s…”

“…special friend.” Avro giggled.

“That’s it. Special friend.” I smirked. “I heard you say you were on Avro’s side?”

“Yes, me and my crew share Avro’s views about our future.” Pet nodded.

“Then why was she the only one flagged as a traitor?”

“Well, she happened to be there… she was convenient.” Pet shook his head. “Let’s not talk about this, though. I don’t feel too comfortable, and I guess you’re here for something apart than for a chit-chat.” Pet walked to Nadyr and shook his hoof. “Pet, nice to meet you.”

“Nadyr. My pleasure.” The half-zebra replied smoothly.

“As usual, you are right. We’re not here to chat, we’re here to defeat Ilyushin!” Avro roared.

“I guessed as much.” Pet smiled. “Well, for your information, he’s entrenched himself in the main control room with his Guard and is waiting for the Guise and the Starlight to arrive with the remaining loyal forces.”

“Loyal forces?” I asked.

“After you took out most of our fleet, we decided it was time to consider other ways of managing the Front. We staged a little coup and left Ilyushin covering behind his desk, praying for his last hopes to come back home in one piece.”

“You really did that?” Avro opened her eyes wide in surprise. “Doesn’t Ilyushin control the Guard?”

“He does, but never underestimate an engineer, Av.” Pet winked. “We used all the automated defences of the base to convince him that taking us on was not a good idea. After all, with only four soldiers to defend him, even a simple turret can become a troublesome foe.”

“My, my, Pet.” Avro smiled. “I always thought you were the one prepared to become a leader.”

“Nuh, I’m not prepared for that kind of jobs. I lack the militaristic attitude to keep all those trigger-happy foals at bay.” Pet waved a hoof. “I prefer to make myself useful by building these toys.” Pet put his hoof on the hull of the D6.

“This isn’t over yet, though.” I warned. “If Ilyushin manages to land the corvettes in the base, you will be in number disadvantage, won’t you?”

“Certainly.” Pet nodded. “We’re working hard on that right now. Still, we are facing some technical problems to seize control of the outer defences.”

“What sort of problems?”

“Come, I’ll explain it to you on the way there.”

Pet turned around and began walking up a spiralling slope around the main silo shaft, with the three of us following him closely. As we advanced through the innards of the facility, I noticed how many of the red stars had been freshly painted over old and almost colorless suns of pre-War Equestria, revealing that this facility had been built before the War, right as Avro had told me. Several corridors that led out of the main shaft seemed to be unused, for the place appeared to have been designed to withhold a far larger population than the one inside at the moment.

Apart from sightseeing, I thought about Pet’s words when I asked him about his crew being on Avro’s side. The haste with which he had disregarded that idea made me suspicious once again. It could mean that they supported Avro’s way of thinking, as he had said, but it could also mean Avro and Ilyushin having fought each other in the past, in which case my beloved marefriend would have another, even bigger skeleton hiding in her closet. I was trying hard to keep those thoughts off my head, since I wanted my relationship with her to carry on, but the amount of unclear edges in her story was beginning to become a bit too large to swallow.

“The main problem,” Pet said “is that the control system for the outer turrets is in Ilyushin’s office. Our first idea was to hack the system to gain access to the firing core, but it appears that there is a total override in the main control terminal, so whatever we do can be nullified by my brother.”

“Then what have you done about it?” Avro asked.

“We severed his connection to the turret system, but it seems that there was some sort of protection against such actions. Now we can’t raise the turrets...”

“Have you tried patching up the backup lines?”

“We’ve made several attempts to get things back on the run, but we’ve had little luck.”

“Hmmm...” Avro frowned. “Let me see what I can do with it.”

“Of course.” Pet smiled. “That’s why I am glad to have you here.”

Pet entered a large room labeled as “Engineering”, where a bunch of ponies in lab coats and jumpsuits worked in several different spots. At a glance, I was able to see various types of armor, guns and aircraft pieces. Undoubtedly, that area was the very core of Breakeven Point’s activity. As soon as we walked into the department, many ponies turned and began cheering at Avro, as if they were welcoming a long lost leader. She quickly disregarded those welcomings and followed Pet.

“Where are you working on the turret system?” Avro asked Pet.

“Over there.” Pet pointed to a terminal close to an open circuit box, where cables and connectors were hanging. “But first, I would like to show you something, Av.”

“Do we have time?” I asked.

“Good question.” Pet nodded. “Junkers! Oi, Junkers! What is the ETA of the corvettes?”

“Twenty minutes at full speed, Pet!” A pegasus replied, without even lifting his face from the screen. “I doubt they’ll make it any quicker.”

“Thanks, Junkers!” Pet nodded. “Twenty minutes, more or less. Do you think you’ll be able to make it?”

Avro laughed.

“You know that I can, Pet. Don’t even doubt it.”

“Then follow me.”

Pet guided us to a nearby room, in which a shiny metal cylinder was on display, as if it were an idol in some

sort of pagan temple. A greenish light shone in the penumbra of the small department, coming from a tiny window of thick crystal in the unknown object. Our host stood close to the uncanny cylinder, looking at it with pride.

“Is it what I think it is?” Avro gasped.

“It is indeed. Project Enola was a total success.” Pet nodded.

“I told you it would!” Avro boasted. “We needed time and patience.”

“What is Project Enola exactly?” I asked out of curiosity.

“It’s an attempt to replicate balefire energy using gemstones.” Pet explained. “When we pegasi arrived at Breakeven Point, we found an unexploded balefire bomb on the bottom of the silo. For years, we left it standing, just to avoid it from going off. One day, Avro suggested that we should try to disarm it in order to study what technology the zebras had used in their weapons. We called the investigation Project Enola, in honor of the pegasus mare who found this facility, and started working on it day and night.”

“What did you find out?”

“Well, zebras used some sort of chemical brew that released a massive blast of magical energy when detonated, but the idea of the balefire bomb was that the energy of the explosion would cause a further reaction in the remaining brew, causing it to release more and more energy. It was a sort of chain reaction. The interesting discovery came when we disarmed the bomb, though. We found out that the potion was already reacting, although at a residual level.”

“In a word, the brew is unstable, and the detonator would only push the reaction downhill?” I asked.

“Exactly! We moved on to replicate that by using an enchanted gemstone, and after months of hard work, we have mastered the unstable incantation and built it into this container.”

“So, you’re telling me you’ve built a balefire bomb?”

“Not necessarily.” Pet shook his head. “Right now, the gemstone is releasing energy, but at a low level. We can use that energy by means of a circuit system that is already enclosed on the cylinder. However, if a surge of power is sent to the gemstone...”

“Balefire explosion.” I nodded.

“That’s right.” Pet nodded.

“Um...” Junkers was waiting outside the room. “Excuse me, Pet, but the corvettes will be here in around fifteen minutes. Shouldn’t we do something about it?”

“Of course.” Pet smiled calmly. He seemed to have a great trust in Avro. “Av, can you handle it?”

“Just give me a toolbox!” Avro pranced. “I’ll get that problem fixed in no time!”

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Tension grew in the room as the minutes went by. Avro was kneeling close to the circuit box, trying out different combinations of wiring, while I stood by the terminal and tried constantly to reach the turret control system, but there was no response. Breakeven Point was defenceless, and the enemy forces were closer as the minutes went by. I could see from the corner of my eye how all the technicians had left their duties and were standing by Junkers’ terminal, keeping an eye on the time for Ilyushin’s forces to arrive. If it hadn’t been for Petlyakov and Avro’s excessive confidence, we would have had five more minutes to handle the situation.

Pet walked up and down the room, apparently calm, but I had the feeling that he was shivering in the inside. If his coup failed, being Ilyushin’s brother wouldn’t save him from being shot... at least, that was the most reasonable outcome to me. The pegasi around Junkers mumbled something that I couldn’t get to understand, but judging from their somber tone, they were on the brink of giving up hopes.

“Pet...” Junkers mumbled. “Ten minutes for the arrival. Should we get ready for combat?”

“Avro, how’s it going?” Pet asked, visibly altered.

“Nothing, no luck.” Avro groaned. “There is no response coming from the turrets. The outbound messages are working properly, but the inbound ones don’t arrive.”

“Have you checked the cross-shunt?”

“Twice, Pet.” Avro mumbled. “It’s fine, it’s perfectly fine.”

“What about the upstream derivation?”

“That’s bollocks, Pet. You can’t bypass a main circuit via an upstream derivation. You know that, I know that, everypony in this room knows that.”

“I didn’t.” Nadyr laughed.

“Not the time, nor the place.” I said coldly.

“I don’t know, Av...” Pet shrugged. “I’m trying to think of other possible ways to recover the inbound messages, but frankly, I can’t find the good one.”

“Maybe the secondary control loop?” Junkers suggested.

“That would be a good idea, but I have already tried it.”

“Tertiary loops?” Junkers tried. “Some of the systems in the base have them.”

“The turrets work on a duplicated network.” Avro shook her head. “Apparently, whoever built this base thought that the defences couldn’t spare a third line.”

“Crap.” Junkers fumed. “I thought that was the solution. It worked for the air recirculators.”

“I know...” Pet groaned. “What’s the ETA?”

“Five minutes.”

“Five already? We need a solution now!” Pet stomped the floor. “Avro...”

“Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Avro yelled. “I’m totally lost here. It could be a loose breaker anywhere in the facility, as much as I know!”

“Keep calm, Avro.” I mumbled. “If it worked before, it must work now.”

“But I don’t know if it worked before!”

Suddenly, an incoming radio call beeped on all terminals. Our time was starting to run out, as the corvettes were already out of the storm and within range. We had to act quick or our battle would be lost.

“Everypony silence!” Pet ordered. “I’ll handle this.”

*“This is corvette Guise approaching base. Repeat, corvette Guise approaching base. Respond, please.”*

“We copy you, Guise.” Pet replied calmly. “Welcome home. What’s your status?”

*“All systems running, although we had to sacrifice some shields to enhance the driveforce. Same happens to the Starlight, we’ve been pushing ourselves to the very limit to get here quickly. By the way, any signs of the D6?”*

“No news here, Guise.” Pet lied blatantly. “We’re beginning landing procedures. Radio back when in position. Base out.”

The communication ended, and Pet let go a long sigh of stress. Some of the technician ponies had left the room and were returning with guns and even armor, ready to entrench themselves and resist. It was a do-or-die situation, and I lacked the knowledge needed to pull us out of it. We were relying on Avro, but she didn’t know what to do either.

“Avro, we’re running out of time!” Pet yelled.

“I KNOW!!” Avro replied, almost crying.

“Eh, you two...” Nadyr mumbled.

“Not now, Nadyr.” Avro interrupted. “Any suggestions, Pet? You’re the one that has been tampering with the system!”

“Well, you’re supposed to be the master engineer!” Pet shrugged.

“And even I can’t find the solution to our problem!” Avro replied.

“Aw, fuck it.” Nadyr grabbed a screwdriver and pushed Avro aside from the circuit box.

“What are you doing, Nadyr?” Avro roared.

“Solving the problem!” The half-zebra roared and tightened two screws, locking a wire in place. “Try it now, Farsight.”

“Let’s see…” I activated the terminal. “Yes… YES! We have reply! The flak system is under our control, mares and gentlecolts.”

“Finally!” Pet sighed while the rest of the engineers cheered. “What was going on?”

“A loose wire. I saw it long ago, but I thought you had it covered.” Nadyr shrugged. “Seems like I outsmarted you!”

“Don’t get cocky.” I groaned.

“Come on, Farsight.” Nadyr smiled. “I just saved your asses. Cut me some slack!”

“Sure, I’ll buy you a beer.” I laughed. “Let’s not lose focus, though. The corvettes will be above us in a minute, and we need to sort them out.”

“We should wait until they’ve begun with the landing procedure. If their main boosters are online, they’ll be able to fly away.” Pet warned.

“Then we must keep this little charade running until they can’t escape our trap.” I nodded. “Will you be able to handle it, Pet?”

“I probably will.” Pet shrugged. “You worry about handling the turrets, understood?”

“Count on it.”

The room became silent once again, but instead of a general feeling of fear, there was expectation in the air. We had the upper hoof now, and we were ready to exploit it. Everypony was in its place, Pet on the radio, the technicians in their workbenches, Avro and Nadyr guarding the door, and I was standing before the flak control terminal, waiting for the proper moment to open fire. Once again, our silence was broken by the incoming call of the radio.

*“Base, this is corvette Starlight calling. We are ready to dock. Repeat, corvettes Starlight and Guise ready to dock.”*

“We copy, Starlight.” Pet replied calmly. “Everything is ready. You have permission to begin descent. Repeat, you have permission to begin descent.”

*“Orders received, base. Beginning landing. Starlight out.”*

The rumbling of the massive arcano-engines filled the air of the engineering area, as the two hulking airships lost altitude to get into the silo of Breakeven Point. I kept constant eye contact with Pet and Avro, waiting for them to signal the optimal moment to open fire. I could feel the tension in their eyes, and I was excited as well, although I had no doubt that we would win that gambit.

“Get ready, Farsight.” Pet nodded. “Fire in three… two… one… NOW!”

I pressed the button on the terminal, and another noise filled the air: it was the constant tableting and rumbling of dozens of flak turrets sending a firestorm to the incoming vessels. All the cards were on the table, and it was time to see which player had the winning hoof. The communications channel flooded with incoming messages from the two attacked airships, letting us know that they were being hit hard.

*“What are you doing? You’re firing at us!”*

*“Are you crazy or what?”*

*“TREASON! We have been betrayed!!”*

*“We are taking heavy damage! The ammo cache has just exploded!”*

*“Sir, should we evacuate?”*

*“Losing power fast! Repeat, we’re losing power fast! Is there anypony out there?”*

*“Fleet Command, what the hell is going on?”*

*“The flotation engine is about to break down! We’re going to... AAAAARGH!”*

**BOOOOOOM!!!**

A massive explosion rocked the entire base, and the radio went dead. The engines of the corvettes had blown apart, causing a chain reaction that had turned the once mighty airships into burning smithereens, scattered inside and outside the silo. The last remnants of the mighty Red Fleet were no more, and Ilyushin was alone and cornered in his own lair. Petlyakov’s crew cheered and pranced, as they had brought their coup to fruition. It was time to bring them to my side.

“Congratulations!” I cheered. “We did it!”

“Yeah!” Nadyr cheered. “Nice work everypony.”

“We couldn’t have done it without your help.” Pet smiled.

“No, no, we just arrived to make the final adjustments, but you began the coup all along.” I patted the pegasus. “You did a very nice job using the turrets against Ilyushin.”

“Meh, we’re engineers.” Pet shrugged. “We like to use our brains more than our muscles.”

“That is something I totally agree with.” I smiled. “So, what now, Pet?”

“What do you mean by ‘now’?” Pet looked puzzled. “Weren’t you supposed to take my brother out?”

“Of course, but that was not what I was asking you. What do you intend to do once this is over? After all, the Communist Pegasi Front will be no more.”

“That is true. Actually, I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Would you be interested in hearing my proposal?” I asked.

“Please go on.” Pet frowned.

“As you might have heard, I am in charge of the City of New Pegasus. I would like you to join my ranks, helping me develop the needs of the city and its inhabitants. I can pay you handsomely, and believe me, I think that my demands will not be as outrageous as those of the NER. I’ve been forced to deal with the leaders of the Republic, and they’re a bunch of nutters.”

“Are they?” Pet smirked. “Which would be your ideas for us to work in?”

“I was thinking in adapting Project Enola to the requirements of New Pegasus. You know that the city takes the power it needs from Hooper Dam, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Well, the Dam is under NER control right now. Let’s imagine that the Republic decides to disconnect us from the grid, or may Celestia not desire that, let’s suppose that the Dam is taken over by the Tsar. We would be left in the dark, and frankly, I don’t want that to happen. You did say that the energy produced by Project Enola could be harnessed, didn’t you?”

“I certainly did, and I see where you’re going.” Pet nodded. “I like your line of thought, Farsight. Simple and accurate. If you pay us properly, we will have no problems working for you. What do you say, folks?”

“I agree with you, Pet.” Junkers smiled. “And I think everypony does the same.”

“In that case, you have got yourself a deal!” Pet shook my hoof in agreement. “One last question, though... where will we work?”

“Hmmm... I guess some of you could stay here, but I would need others at Neighliss base and some others by my side in New Pegasus. Can you sort it out?”

“Certainly. It was just a mere doubt that had sprung to mind, nothing major.” Pet turned around to address his crew. “All right, everypony, this is how we’ll do it. Aichi, I want you to handle the airbase. I assume that Farsight will want to use its automated defences, and you’re the one more qualified to do that. Bleriot, you keep in charge of Breakeven Point. I want the base cleaned as soon as possible, understood? I’ll go to New Pegasus with Junkers, and if we need more of you to join us, we’ll let you know.”

“Got it!” The crew replied.

“Now that this is sorted out, let’s finish what we came here for!” I stomped the floor.

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“Keep your heads down!” Avro roared. “These ponies have massive firepower!”

A hailstorm of minigun bullets whizzed above our manes while we tried to keep as stuck to the ground as possible. The small antechamber that led to Ilyushin’s office and sanctuary had turned into a smoking battlefield, with explosions and gunfire tearing the concrete walls and pillars apart. The Guard of the Communist Front had entrenched itself in an attempt to pull off one last glorious feat, but they had to know that they had absolutely nothing to do. Only their fanatic devotion to their leader kept them resisting.

“This is crazy!” Nadyr whined. “How are we supposed to deal with these bastards? I can’t even look out of cover without being blown to pieces!”

“Farsight, didn’t you have a targeting system of some kind?” Avro asked.

“You mean S.A.T.S.?”

“That one precisely, yes.”

“It won’t work, darling. I need to be looking at them to take aim... and frankly, I don’t want to risk my hide.”

“Then what?” Nadyr whined. “Do we wait until they run out of ammo?”

“That could be a possibility...” Avro mumbled.

“I don’t think our cover will last much longer.” I groaned. Chips of concrete were coming out of every possible hiding spot, forcing us to squeeze against anything that could hinder the enemies’ aim. “We need to think of something.”

“Good, because you are the thinky pony!” Avro exclaimed. “Do something!”

“Okay, here goes nothing.” I sighed. “HOLD YOUR FIRE!”

“What? You want us to stop firing?” Nadyr exclaimed.

“Shut up and do it!”

Our guns went mute and soon enough, our enemies stopped firing too. They were probably confused because of our unexpected reaction, and I could bet my gold that they were also thinking what to do next. Now that they were distracted, it was time for me to take the initiative.

“Oi, you brave Communist soldiers!” I roared. “I’d like to speak with you!”

“Who the fuck are you, you runt?” a soldier replied.

“My name is Farsight, you might have heard of me. Who am I speaking to?”

“Comrade Sergeant Fairey, of the Red Guard. Yes, I have heard of you and of your attachment to the traitor DeHavilland. What do you want?”

“I want to reason with you, Sergeant. There is no need for us to fight.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Farsight. The Red Front is on the verge of victory, and that is the reason why we must resist. With our might and our sacrifice, we pegasi will reach a status of power and dominance over the Wasteland!”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, laughing dimly. “Tell me, Fairey, what is the status of your fleet?”

“Our airships soar the skies!” Fairey replied.

“Really? What about the explosion you just heard? You had to hear the turrets and the detonation.”

“Yes, we did hear it.”

“Then tell me, Fairey, what do you think your turrets blew up?”

“Ilyushin told us that the traitor DeHavilland hijacked one of our gunships and took out Comrade Grumman. We knew that her wishes of vengeance would drive her here. I still don’t know how you managed to survive the crash, though.”

“Simple. There was no crash.” I chuckled. “Do you know what happened after Neighliss, Sergeant?”

“Our last update has been your arrival at Breakeven Point.” Fairey grumbled.

“Who’s in charge of keeping you patched up to the news, Fairey?”

“Comrade Commander Ilyushin has been doing that, ever since his despicable brother Petlyakov tried to seize power.”

“Ah, of course.” I nodded, although Fairey couldn’t see me. “It had to be Ilyushin. Then, I assume that he didn’t tell you of what happened to the Victory or the Revolution.”

“Nothing happened to them, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Would you bet your life?” I said coldly. “What if I told you that the two Carriers are nothing more than heaps of burning metal somewhere in the northern desert of Neighvada?”

“I would say you’re speaking bullshit.”

“Am I? How was I supposed to know that the Victory and the Revolution were flying together in close formation en route to New Pegasus when we intercepted them?”

“You could have guessed that.” Fairey grumbled. There was a soft change of tone in his voice, though. “After all, you only needed to know the names of the ships, something that DeHavilland could have told you.”

“You’re right, I’ll give you that. However, would you change your mind if I told you something that Avro couldn’t have told me, because she was with me at that time?”

“Good luck finding that out.” Fairey laughed in disdain.

“Simple enough. The frigate doing scouting work was the Horizons.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, you stupid cunt!” Fairey laughed. “It was the New Roam!”

“Uh... sir, he’s right.” One of the soldiers interrupted. “The New Roam was switched to escort duties because of a small engine malfunction. Frigate Horizons was appointed for the spearhead, just prior to the departure.”

“What?” Fairey mumbled. “How do you know that?”

“I was in the canteen and I heard the news. It seems that Commander Ilyushin has been keeping us deliberately off the loop.”

“Then the Fleet...”

“Fairey, I welcome you to come out to the main shaft and see the wreckage. You’ll recognize the corvettes Guise and Starlight there.” I was grinning smugly.

“But why would the Commander lie to us?”

“That’s easy. Your Fleet has been destroyed, the majority of the remaining pegasi has staged a coup... your

only chance to survive is to hide yourself behind a wall of fanatic soldiers who are prepared to give their lives for you. The only way to achieve that is by lying, because nopony would stay by your side in your situation.” I sighed. “Fairey, your battle is already lost, so put down your guns. I will welcome you in my ranks, as I reckon you are fine soldiers; but taking Ilyushin out of the picture is a must here.”

“Sergeant Fairey...” one of the Guards mumbled. “Farsight is right, we don’t owe Ilyushin nothing more. If he has been lying to us all this time, there is no reason for us to stay by his side.”

“Be reasonable, Fairey.” I said calmly. “There will be no hard feelings towards you, since you were fulfilling your duty.”

“But our loyalties...” Fairey grumbled.

“Loyalty is a two-way trade. Where’s your Commander’s loyalty now, Sergeant?” I roared. “Snap out of it!”

“All right...” Fairey sighed. “Everypony stand down. We’re surrendering.”

“Good.” I popped out of cover and saw four Red troopers walking our way, their helmets still on. “Welcome to New Pegasus... so to speak.”

“Thank you, sir.” Fairey shook my hoof. “Your orders?”

“Meet up with Petlyakov at the shaft. He’ll tell you what we’ll do.”

“Understood. Move out!”

Fairey roared his orders and the other Guards marched out of the antechamber, leaving us alone to face the reason that we were there for: Ilyushin. When we opened the door to his office, he was waiting for us behind a large wooden desk full of maps and papers, with a gun ready to fire. He was dressed in his parade uniform, gleaming with medals; and desperation shone in his face as he realized that he was alone against the three of us.

“Well, well, well, look at who we have here.” Ilyushin growled, displeased. “My dear Avro, it took you long enough... and it seems like you have brought your knight in shining armor as well!”

“To be about to die, you spew a lot of insults, you know.” Nadyr grinned.

“Who invited you to this party, stripes?” Ilyushin winced.

“I just happened to crash in. Problem?”

“You’re just stupid, Ilyushin.” Avro cooed and strutted up and down the room. “Instead of gambling for your life, which is the only thing you have left, you act like a complete prick.”

“Ah, Avro, but that’s where you’re mistaken.” Ilyushin sighed. “I can’t gamble for something that I have already lost. I know for certain that your lover here is the one who is going to pull the trigger, because you simply can’t. Not after all we’ve been through.”

“What?” I asked. “Speak up, Ilyushin.”

“He wants to mess with your head, Farsight.” Avro warned.

“Really?” Ilyushin laughed. “Then why don’t you kill me and end this farce? DO IT!”

Avro gazed at the fallen Commander with hate in her eyes, but didn’t pull the trigger. Something was stopping her from taking the final step.

“You see? You simply can’t.” Ilyushin hissed. “I guess you’ll want to know why, don’t you, Farsight?”

“Don’t listen to him!” Avro screamed. “Please...”

“Well, she can’t kill me because she and I have a long story behind us. She used me, plain and simply, to get to a position of power in the Front.” Ilyushin grinned mischievously. “Tell me, Farsight, have you witnessed what she’s capable of doing in bed? That body is a brainwashing machine... it took me several years to find out, and quite a lot of nights of passion.”

“Avro... is that true?” I winced.

“So she has done it to you too!” Ilyushin laughed.

“He’s lying!” Avro cried. “He and I have never slept together.”

“Really.” Ilyushin sneered. “Tell me, Farsight... did she ask you to rub her wings, when she was in the thick of it?”

“Yes...” I felt a shiver of delight when I remembered that moment, just to quickly shake it off. “She did.”

“If she and I had never been together, how would I know that?”

“I can’t think of a way.” I groaned, feeling emptier inside.

“You see, Avro is a professional stallion-eater.” Ilyushin sighed. “When I first met her, she was just a low-grade repairpony. She just took care of the everyday appliances, such as toasters or coffee-grinders. She had talent, no doubt, but she needed a little push to climb the ranks... and she clung to me, exchanging sex and pretended love for favors. Then, once she got so close to me that I couldn’t think straight, she began to control the politics of the Front. It was her who convinced me of building a large combat Fleet instead of our transport vessels. I have to admit that the designs that she and my brother Petlyakov conceived are very good, but we didn’t need to fight as long as we could keep hidden.”

“But she told me that...” I babbled. The strength of the revelations were making me shake, and I couldn’t even speak straight.

“Lies, lies, lies.” Ilyushin mumbled. “All lies. She wanted to play Queen of the Wasteland, she wanted all of the world for her to keep. Then, once our Fleet was ready, she tricked me to start with Project Enola. I thought she had steered away from her domination ideals, but then Pet told me that it could be used as a balefire bomb. I realized that her intentions were to use it to start a war, and that’s when I confronted her and took over. However, I didn’t have the guts to kill her and it has cost me everything... I’ve lost everything. So, Farsight, this is what will happen to you too. Once you kill me, it will all be over. She’ll dump you for the next passer-by.”

I felt as if I had been hit by lightning. All the lies, all the half-baked stories that Avro had been feeding me added up. Everything was clear as daylight: Avro had climbed the ladder using Ilyushin as his stepping stone, and once beside him, she had tried to undermine his status by using others like Pet to support her ideas. Then, Ilyushin had managed to see through her and had tried to stop her machinations, but she had managed to escape and had landed close to me. From there on, it was the same story over and over again. There was so much irony in the situation, come to think of it. The master schemer had been out-schemed himself.

## **BA-BA-BANG!!**

Avro’s miniguns ripped Ilyushin’s body apart, thrusting him to the back of the room like a broken rag doll. We had won, but at what cost? I couldn’t trust Avro anymore, not after what she had done to me. She had used me, she had betrayed me in a way so harmful that it made me want to walk away from everypony in the world. All that we had lived, all the passion and tenderness... all those moments that had made me feel loved... were those all fake? Had she been employing me as a puppet for her own devices?

“Farsight, Ilyushin was a dirty liar.” Avro said, trying to keep calm. “He was trying to make us fight each other... please, don’t believe any of his words.”

“Should I believe yours instead?” I grunted.

“Why do you say that? Don’t you trust me?”

“I want to... but now I can’t. Not after all the changes in your story, all the ups and downs. I can’t discern truth from lie in your words.”

“You’re assuming that he was telling the truth.”

“At least he sounded coherent.”

“I told you that Ilyushin was very persuasive... Darling, please, forget about his words. He was desperate.”

“What about the wings?”

“The wings?”

“Yes! The part with the wing-rubbing! I assume you don’t tell everypony your fetishes!” I roared.

“He... he must have overheard it somewhere. I never... I never told him what turned me on.” Avro muttered. “Farsight, my dear... let’s return home.”

“Avro, I don’t know what to say.” I held back the tears of anger. “I’ve been very patient with you, tolerating each and every odd change in your story. I’ve followed you deep into action, and I’ve done all this because I love you. I thought you felt the same for me.”

“But I do!” Avro galloped close to me and embraced me with her wings. “I love you like I have never loved any other pony. Look in my eyes, Farsight, and tell me if I’m lying to you now. I. Love. You.”

I stood gazing at her ambarine eyes while she spoke those words, but I simply couldn’t disregard the fact that Ilyushin’s words had sown mistrust in my heart. I had no proof, but my gut was telling me that the deceased Commander was right, and that Avro had used him like she had used me. Maybe she felt something for me, but there was no telling if those feelings were sincere or fabricated.

“Farsight, please...” she whispered in my ear, “let’s fly back home. I understand that we need to set things straight, and there is something I need to tell you. Come, let’s go.”

For a moment I considered the possibility of forgetting about all this episode and walking away, but I knew in the very deep that it would only make the problem bigger. I needed to think coldly, and I couldn’t do that with Avro around.

“No.” I gently freed myself of her embrace. “I... I can’t, Avro. Not now. I still love you, at least, I think I do, but I am too confused at the moment. I need some time alone to think and to decide what to do. I’ve done things that I wouldn’t have done if it wasn’t for love, but I can’t rely on that reason... Go with Nadyr. I’ll return with Pet and the Enola.”

“Farsight...”

“Go.”

“But I...”

“Don’t make this harder! GO!”

“My love...”

“GO AWAY!!! NOW!!!” I roared, crying.

“Let’s go, Avro.” Nadyr grabbed the pegasus mare and walked away. “He’ll get over it, but he needs time.”

Both my companions exited the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts. When no pony could see or hear me, I sat on my flanks and began to cry. A wound in the heart may be invisible, but it’s the one that hurts the most.

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For over an hour, I stood in Ilyushin’s office, browsing through papers and looking at the entries in the terminal, trying to find solace in the retrieval and analysis of data, but there was little that could make my mind drift away of the pain and sorrow that filled my body. I had been lied to and used like a puppet. I took pride on being the master puppeteer, the one pulling the strings... just to end up like that. I let go a long sigh and wiped the tears off my eyes.

What would I do with her? I felt angry and wanted to have some sort of retribution, but in the very deep, I still loved her. Something in me wanted to believe that there was a connection between the two of us, something genuine and undeniable. Still, if everything between us was fake, why did I cling to her so much? Why couldn’t I take a step back and think rationally, as I had done before?

Deep as I was in my thoughts and troubles, I hadn’t noticed a small symbol in the terminal screen that

revealed an incoming communication. Who could be wanting to contact me? Or was the message meant to be for Ilyushin? Maybe the Red Front had others backing them up, and we had just awoken a sleeping giant... All those questions acted like a breeze of fresh air in my mind, putting me back in gear and ready to face whoever the caller was.

I pressed the button to accept the transmission, and the screen showed the face of a unicorn mare with clear fur and mane, although I couldn't tell which colors she sported, due to the screen being in black and glowy green. My mystery caller wasn't young anymore, although she wasn't too old either. My guess was that she could be around twenty years older than me, but her face showed that she had been through quite a lot of good and bad moments. Her expression was kind, but showed traces of hardness and unwavering resolve, as her eyes met mine in the screen.

"Finally." She spoke with a mixture of sadness and relief.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Why finally?"

"I've been trying to contact you for a long time, Farsight, but I couldn't get past the bloody Divide."

"How do you know my name?" I grunted.

"I have been hearing it for a long time, Farsight. Even if I couldn't see you like I can see the rest of Equestria, I've known of your existence and your feats. Many ponies in the Republic speak about you with fear and admiration."

"You won't be implying that you... you're the Light Bringer?"

"My name is Littlepip, Farsight." She shook her head in dismay. "All the nicknames have been perverted by the NER... they don't fit me no more. Stable Dweller, Light Bringer... all of them used by Praline to enforce her rule over Equestria."

"I thought you were the Supreme Leader."

"Supreme Leader?" Littlepip let go a disgruntled sigh. "Sit on my horn and spin. I am just a mythic figure for almost all of the Wasteland, as I was for you until a minute ago, Farsight. Very few ponies can reach me, which gives the Republic the chance to use and abuse my figure as a reason to carry forth any of their policies, even if I disagree with most of them."

"Can't you try and reach out to the population?"

"The Republic watches me very closely, Farsight. They have me on a leash, trapped in my ivory tower, with no chance whatsoever to change the world. I may have brought the light, but they have grabbed it for their own profit."

"If you're so tightly controlled, how have you managed to contact me?"

"I suppose they didn't expect anypony to respond in this frequency. However, I'm sure that this will be our last chance to speak."

"Why?"

"Let me ask you a question, Farsight. Do you really think that the Republic didn't know about the existence of the Red Front?"

"It sounds hard to believe, but I've seen stranger things happening."

"Believe me, they did know very well about Ilyushin's group of rogue pegasi. However, they let it be, because they thought that a closed air space would help them conquer Neighvada and the lands beyond. In fact, I know that Praline and Ilyushin signed an alliance to help each other in case of need."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I am not." Littlepip frowned. "The NER denied your petition of help, didn't it?"

"Yes. Harpsong said that they didn't deserve the Republic's attention, though."

“Did you believe that?”

“It wasn’t about believing or not believing. We had to do something, and if we couldn’t count with the Republic, we would have to act on our own.”

“And so you did.” Littlepip sighed. “Have you thought on the consequences?”

“I...”

“No, you have not.” Littlepip smiled. “Of course you haven’t. You’re in love. I see it in your eyes, you can’t hide it. I’ve been through the same, believe me.”

“I know you have. I read the book.”

“Ah, yes, the book.” She sneered. “No other pony in the world has more coverage than me, I guess. Anyway, I know you’re in love, and I know that love drives us to do things without thinking on what they’ll bring.”

“For me, they’ve brought sorrow. All lies... but it’s no use to speak about it anymore. What do you want from me? You said you’ve been trying to reach me for a long time.”

“I have.” Littlepip nodded. “I am worried about the future of the Wasteland, Farsight. All the good things that we fought for, all the noble ponies that sacrificed themselves to turn this world into a better place... everything is falling apart once again. It seems like we haven’t learnt the lesson that the War taught us, and we keep being selfish and twisted. There is no development in the Republic, only bloated expansionism and the same raiderish behaviour of earlier days, only disguised under the banner of a new regime.”

“I have seen them work, Littlepip. I understand your point.”

“The problem is that there are no leaders, there are no ponies capable of seeing the bigger picture. I thought there was no hope, but then I began to hear the stories about New Pegasus, about how something was changing in there... the news about the gangs allying and cooperating, the downfall of the old mobsters who had kept the city in a state of lethargy for decades, all of it driven by a young and ambitious pony. That’s when I started believing that there was a chance for a better future, for somepony to step up and follow what me and my friends began twenty years ago.”

“You don’t really know me, Littlepip. I am as selfish as you can get out here.”

“Are you?”

“Certainly.”

“Still, being so selfish, under your command New Pegasus has flourished. Others would have pillaged the city and would have let it rot, but you have put your efforts in making those under your rule live in prosperity. That is something that all of us could profit from, if you decided to take the risk.”

“I think you’re trying to convince the wrong pony, Littlepip.” I shrugged. “I don’t believe in ponykind. All that it’s showed me is cruelty and vileness. This is a pony-eat-pony world, and the only reason why I work for the welfare of New Pegasus is to ensure that I don’t get toppled by any revolution of unhappy citizens.”

“Is that a reason to turn your back on the world and leave everything aside?” Littlepip frowned. “If I had done the same, I would have found a place to hide and would have lived as a hermit... and then ponies like Red Eye or the Goddess would have had nothing in their way to stop them. You have the power to turn this world into a better place... why don’t you do it?”

“You’re not the first one that tells me the same story.” I grunted.

“Because I’m not the only one that sees your true potential. You’re smart, cunning and brave. You have overcome dangers that many other ponies wouldn’t even have dared to face. You know how to make ponies tick, and you know how to handle things... There hasn’t been anypony more prepared than you to reunite Equestria.”

“Oh, please.” I laughed. “Cut it out. Reuniting Equestria is an impossible ordeal.”

“Not for you, Farsight. I believe in you, and I have the feeling that you know what the right decision is. You

could be a chosen one, even if you don't believe in such things."

"Littlepip, you're right. I don't believe in such things, and I think that you shouldn't try to waste your time trying to convince me to start changing my way of thinking." I shook my head sternly. "I understand that you must feel very frustrated because they are using you for their purposes... I know the sensation."

"It's not that, Farsight... After all these years, I've realized that there are things that need to be done in the Wasteland. Ponykind needs individuals capable of devoting themselves to greater purposes, for the greater good. The Wasteland needs heroes, Farsight, and you qualify to be one."

"I am no hero, Littlepip. I don't know about you, but I never wanted to be a hero. I have fought to survive, and then I've played with everypony to climb the ladder. That's not very heroic... Sorry, but I am not the pony you are looking for."

Littlepip let go a long and mournful sigh.

"Oh well... I don't give up hope yet, though. Don't forget about my words, Farsight. If one day you change your mind, you'll have me backing you up. Littlepip out."

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Petlyakov was waiting for me at the shaft, close to a gunship with the engine already buzzing and ready to go. He had taken off the dirty orange jumpsuit and had switched it for a sharp-looking blue and silver flightsuit, similar to the one Avro used to wear. His calm smile and peaceful attitude turned worried when he saw my face.

"Ah, Farsight, there you are." He shook my hoof. "Is something wrong? You look... sad."

"I've had some issues in there... but you don't need to worry about them, Pet. They are mine to solve."

"Are they?" Pet snickered. "You and I are on the same team now, and whatever worries the leader of my team is something I should at least know about. Maybe I can provide a solution."

"I thank you for your disposition, Pet, but I don't think you can help me with this."

"It's about Av, right?" Pet asked. "I was surprised when I saw her and the zebra leave the base without you."

"Yes, it's about Avro..." I sighed. "She and I have had a bit of a clash."

"I see. Well, she can be a bit difficult sometimes." Pet shrugged. "Everypony in Breakeven Point knows that. After all, Av is a bit... peculiar. Anyway, what's the problem?"

"I don't know if I want to talk about it." I grunted.

"Have it your way, Farsight." Pet shook his head. "Should we be leaving, or do you have something else to do here?"

"Is the Enola device ready?"

"Yes, I loaded it myself into this little baby." Pet patted the hull of the gunship, which made a soft clunking sound.

"Isn't the device heavy?"

"Not really. It's made out of light materials, and besides, I was lucky enough to find some pre-War anti-gravity suspension devices that were still working. They help to ease the load."

"Fair enough." I nodded. "Let's go then."

Pet leapt into the gunship cockpit, while I climbed into the back. The menacing metal cylinder of the Enola device was sitting there, tightly strapped to the walls and the floor of the small aircraft. I latched myself to the Mystral while Pet fiddled with the controls, getting the engine into optimal levels of output and working an ascending trajectory out of the base.

"Are you ready?" Pet asked.

“As ready as I can be.” I sighed.

“Then hold on tight! This ascent is going to be tough!”

Easier said than done. The gunship darted upward at full speed, as if it had been released from a gigantic rubber band; and I felt all my body being pressed against the floor. The pain coming from my legs was close to making me black out, but Pet didn’t seem to be too affected by the crushing downforce. He just whistled a tune and handled the controls of the aircraft with patience and proficiency. I saw the concrete walls end, and we whizzed into the open skies above the sandy storms of the Divide. Once high enough, Pet stabilized the gunship and began flying at a fixed altitude.

“Well, we’re out!” He stretched. “How was it?”

“Frankly, I wouldn’t like to do that again.” I groaned.

“You earthlings are not used to moving in the vertical axis, that’s all.” Pet grinned. “A dozen flights more, and you’ll be good to go.”

“Still, I don’t want to do a dozen flights. Not even a half dozen.”

“Oh well...” Pet shrugged.

Silence fell between us, as I didn’t feel like replying to Pet’s wisecracking remarks. He was a nice fellow, odd to the bone, and he had a tendency to want to have the last word in every discussion. Then again, it was good to have his intelligence in our side.

“Pet...” I said. “I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest with me. Really honest.”

“Go ahead.”

“What happened between Avro and Ilyushin?” I asked. “Is she the kind of mare that plays with stallions?”

“Ilyushin told you the same old tale, didn’t he?” Pet smiled. “Well, they did have a relationship together... and I’ll admit that Avro can be a bit mischievous sometimes, but they broke up because Ilyushin was a total dick.”

“Really? Then what about building the Fleet?”

“Avro was a counsellor, Farsight. Both shared the idea of a powerful fleet soaring the skies, but my brother had no idea about what we needed. Avro, on the other hoof, did; and being Ilyushin’s most trusted pony, she was the one he asked for help.”

“But...” I mumbled. “She lied to me, Pet. All the time, she told me stories about how noble she was and how evil the Front had been to her.”

“There is something I can’t deny... Avro loved to be treated as somepony important, so it’s understandable that she does anything to cling to that relevance.” Pet shrugged. “She’s like that, and there’s not much you can do about her.”

“I trusted her, Pet.” I groaned. “I did all she asked me to do, and then I find out that she did it not because she loved me, but because I was somepony important. What do you expect me to do?”

“I’m no pony to tell you what you have to do... I only say that you shouldn’t rush to judge her. Avro seemed very worried and sad when she left Breakeven Point.”

“Really?” I blinked.

“I swear to Celestia.” Pet raised his hoof. “Besides, she told me that...”

**BOOOM! BOOM! BOOOOM!**

A series of explosions rocked the gunship, making us flail around. What could have caused them? Was it a malfunction in one of the systems? Or were we being attacked by somepony? If that was the case, who could it be?

“What is going on?” I yelled.

“We’re under attack!” Pet groaned, while switching through different control panels.

“By whom? Is it another gunship?”

“No... the radars show no activity. It must come from the ground!”

“Flak gunners?” I mumbled. “But we’re flying over Republic territory! I thought you were allied with them!”

“You said it right, we WERE allied with them.” Pet stomped the metal floor. “But it seems that some ponies don’t stand much for their word. Let’s hope it was all a...”

**BOOOM!! BOOM! BOOOOM!!**

“You were saying?” I growled.

“Damn!” Pet yelled, as the control panels turned red. “We’ve lost the air brakes and our engine has been hit!”

“What does it mean?”

“Well, we can’t land without brakes and we’ll plummet down if the engine fails.” Pet whined. “And with that on board...”

“Oh crap.” I realized that a crash landing could fire the Enola. “Let me think... this is what we’ll do. You take the Enola with you and fly back home.”

“But...” Pet stuttered.

“You said it’s easy to handle, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Yes, the antigrav systems make it very light.”

“Then pick it up and return to New Pegasus with it.”

“What about you, Farsight?”

“I’ll try to land this thing as softly as possible.” I answered, trying to appear calm. “I’ve seen you and Avro pilot these tin cans... I’ll manage to lay it on the ground.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, I’m not, but what else can we do? You can’t sustain both me and the Enola, can you?”

“I don’t think so...”

“In that case, get flying already!” I ordered.

Pet walked to the back of the gunship while I unlatched myself and advanced clumsily towards the cockpit. The controls were simple, a rod to guide the aircraft, a power lever and a lot of buttons and control panels. Anyway, I just needed to get down without crashing. Nothing too complicated... ha ha.

“OK, Farsight.” Pet had already detached the Enola from the hull and was ready to fly away. “I would advise you to lower the power output to a 30%. That way, you’ll gradually lose altitude and maybe even some speed due to friction. Then try to land somewhere flat and open, just to have time to stop.”

“Got it.” I nodded.

“Don’t forget about bailing out if necessary. It’s better to get a bit whacked by a roll on the ground than to die in a mash of burning metal.”

“Will you fly away, dammit?” I grunted.

Pet grabbed the metal cylinder of the Enola and opened his wings wide.

“Good luck, Farsight.” He nodded. “Let’s hope we meet again soon.”

The pegasus jumped out of the gunship, leaving me alone with the task of landing it in the least traumatic way possible. I should have been scared, even terrified, for the prospect of dying was very close, but I guess that my mind was too busy processing all the data from the control panels to even think about fear. Following Pet’s orders, I moved the power lever down to 30 percent, and the engine responded by moaning sadly as the

energy demanded out of the gemstone became dimmer. The gunship rattled and shook, and without notice, began to lose altitude at a worrisome rate. Pet hadn't warned me that the descent would be so steep, and I was forced to look for a proper place to land. There was no wide flat area to be seen, as that zone of the Neighvada Wasteland was craggy and irregular.

"Shit..." I mumbled. "I don't have too much time."

Suddenly, I saw my salvation before me. The crags and hills were descending into a vast open extension of water: Lake Honeymead. I just needed to use the water surface to brake the gunship until it came to a halt, and it would all be over. I smiled out of pure satisfaction, and pushed the rod to get close to the lake.

"Easy now... easy now..." I grumbled.

The small aircraft vibrated when the lower end touched the water, and I pushed it a bit more downward to cause a greater drag resistance, as the far end of the lake was getting closer and it didn't seem that the gunship was going to stop anytime soon. I certainly didn't want to get to the other shore, as it was territory of the Tsardom, but if I pushed the rod further down I would end up sinking in the lake.

"No... no... stop... stop!" I punched the control panel. "Stop, NOW!"

Despite all my cries and whines, the gunship reached the eastern shore of Lake Honeymead, crashing harshly against the rocky ground. The violent deceleration sent me headfirst against the control panels, and the impact left me dizzy and disoriented. Bleeding from the forehead, I stumbled out of the downed aircraft and began to walk along the lakeshore. If I had been in a better condition, I would have paid attention to my E.F.S. If I hadn't been knocked so hard, I would have seen the hostiles getting close. Then again, I wasn't.

"Freeze." Somepony cocked a gun, and before I could do anything, something hit me in the back of my head, and the world turned black.

#

Note: Reputation Change

Communist Pegasi Front: Obedient. The remnants of the rogue pegasi group have decided to join your ranks.

## Chapter 23: Dragon Attack

*“Good afternoon, mares and gentlecolts, and welcome once again to another hour of great music and wonderful entertainment here, at everypony’s favourite station, New Pegasus Radio, the home of the best classics and the groundbreaking new hits! As always, I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, and I’m here to bring you the tunes you have all been willing to hear. This last piece was one of our local crooner’s best, and you know who I’m talking about. Of course, I mean Dino Maretino! After some months touring through the NER, he returned home with a renewed will to sing live in our city, and I tell you, each show is a total killer! It’s really difficult to get a seat, so if you want to see him live, you’d better get moving, or you’ll miss the chance!*

*It’s time for another news update! Remember the rumour that began spreading some time ago about a battle taking place in the skies above Neighvada? Well, it seems to be actually true, my dear listeners! A team of scavengers sent by the New Pegasus City Board has returned with proof of wreckage in the northern desert area, and caravans are already being established to scavenge the ruined airships in the search for technology, goods and raw materials. Scrap traders everywhere from Hooper Dam to Divide Pass are rejoicing, as they will have plenty of wares to sell. How this discovery will affect the prices is something that is yet to be seen, though...*

*Something that still remains a mystery is the identity of the contender forces. The NER has claimed not to know about the existence of the downed airships, and keeps claiming to have nothing to do with them. This humble reporter has done her share of journalism to know how to handle such statements, and has decided to take a little trip to one of the many Republican bases across the territory. According to most of the low-ranked troopers, the NER Air Force is based on pegasi and griffins, without any kind of machinery to keep them airborne. Now, this could be a widespread lie, but frankly, I would put my caps on that being the truth.*

*Could this be the Tsardom’s doing? The enemy force attacking from the east is a total mystery, as very few has still transcended from their way of waging war and their war machine. However, and once again according to the reports of troopers who have been in the frontlines, it is unlikely that the forces of the Tsar have such mysterious machines in their ranks. Apparently, their way of fighting gravitates mostly around the use of blades and lances instead of projectile and laser weapons, so it’s hard to actually believe that they have an airforce.*

*Moving on to matters of war, things are starting to look grim for the Republican forces on the East Bank of Hooper Dam. Even if their resistance is being spotless, the sheer number of Tsardom troops being syphoned into the area has begun to push them back onto the Dam itself. The last remaining NER Rangers are doing an immense sacrifice by holding their position at Camp Manefield, now dubbed Meatgrinder Hill, in a display of dark and edgy wartime humour. From here, I’d like to give you all our support. Every single day counts!*

*After all, let’s think of it for a moment... what will happen to our way of living if the Tsar manages to overrun Hooper Dam and marches into Neighvada? We don’t know much about this mysterious leader, who has been able to push the formerly almighty forces of the NER back into our lands. Does he endorse slavery? Does he abide laws like the ones of the Republic, or is he just another tribal chieftain who has been able to amass enough ponypower to fulfil his mad desires of world domination? Frankly, I wouldn’t want to find out.*

*Once again, that was all for this hour. We’ll be back with more news updates in sixty minutes, but in the meantime, let’s enjoy some more music to soothe our weary bodies and souls. You know, every time I feel down, I like to resort to the classics... I always enjoy handling the old records, hearing the buzz of static when the needle touches the vinyl... and then, when the music starts to play, I take a deep breath and try to let the tune entrance me. Speaking of which, here’s a little Octavia to make your day a bit brighter! Remember that you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking right into your hearts!”*

I woke up lying on a mattress that smelled of urine and decay, hearing orders being barked in the distance

and feeling as if I had been run over by a Stormwind class Carrier. The last thing I remembered was to have crashed on the lakeshore and to have been hit from behind, but that wouldn't explain the calamitous state I was in. Probably, my captors had not been very respectful when it came to holding a prisoner, but then again, this was not New Pegasus. I had been downed and captured in the Wasteland, with all its implications. The fact that I wasn't dead yet meant that somepony expected something out of me.

The real pain, however, was still on the inside. Avro's lies were like a flaming dagger thrust through my heart, tearing me in two, as part of me wanted to break up with her and part of me kept being awestruck by her beauty and presence. I couldn't just forgive her, but I couldn't leave her behind. No matter how strongly my mind told me that she had played me like a fool, my heart kept wanting to be near her, to feel her body close to mine, to hear her voice... It was impossible for me to make my mind, at least by myself. If I only had Rose beside me... she had warned me of Avro's fake ways, and I hadn't listened. She had been my voice of reason all those years, always beside me, caring and supporting me, my loyal partner, my friend... Should I... Should I have looked at her as a soulmate instead of as a daughter?

Something was off about that idea, though. I kept seeing her as a filly, as the filly I had met in the Wasteland several years ago, even if she had grown to become an attractive mare. Thinking of her as I had thought of Avro before her treason felt odd and somehow disturbing. No matter how strange things I had come across in the Wasteland, I simply couldn't picture myself and Rose doing the things I had done with the pegasus mare. It was... wrong, even if I had no arguments to back up that statement. It plainly felt bad. I shook and shivered in angst and despair, as those thoughts went through my mind.

"Hey, look, he's finally awake!" A voice said, making me open my eyes.

I had been holed up in a crumbling room with three other ponies, all of them dressed in rags and seriously beaten. Two of them were stallions, the other was a mare, and the three of them had a martial aura, which led me to think that they were troopers. NER, probably, captured by who I guessed our host was.

"Are you alright?" The younger looking stallion asked.

"Urgh... I don't really feel alright." I groaned. "How do I look like?"

"You don't look good, friend." The older stallion smirked. "Then again, none of us look good. We're dressed in filthy clothes, we're hungry, we're wounded and we're being held captive, probably to be sold as slaves. You wouldn't expect us to be ready for a fashion show, would you?"

"I guess not." I tried to smile.

"Of course. Are you wounded?"

"I don't know." I mumbled. "Everything feels in place, even if a bit battered."

"Like your hindlegs?" The mare smiled. "Those are some fancy pants you're wearing."

"Pants?" I blinked in surprise.

"Well, I call them pants, but they're more like metal socks." The mare replied.

"Metal? Oh, you mean these!" I smiled. "They're the result of a bad wound I took years ago."

"I see. That's not the usual Wastelander remedy, though." The younger stallion let go a soft laugh. "Would you mind telling us who you are?"

I frowned, as I didn't really like the looks of things. These ponies had begun asking compromising questions, and I was outnumbered three to one, without a chance of resorting to any kind of weapon. I couldn't really tell if their intentions were bad, or if they were overtly hostile, which made me feel even more uncomfortable.

"Look, we know that you're a Stable Dweller, we've seen the PipBuck in your forehoof." The older stallion said calmly. "I understand that you may want to have your secrets, and we won't go in there. Just tell us your name, so we can address you properly."

"Fine..." I sighed. "My name is Farsight."

“Farsight?” They gasped. “THE Farsight? From New Pegasus?”

“The very one.” I nodded.

“Then keep it down, my boy.” The older stallion frowned. “You don’t want Nevski to know you’re here.”

“Who is Nevski?” I groaned.

“Nevski is the envoy of the Tsar to handle this war. He’s a fearsome commander, always hiding behind that dragon mask of his... or hers. Actually, we don’t even know his gender or race. We’re talking about a total mystery.” The mare whistled.

“Why would this Nevski be interested in me?” I shrugged. “It’s not me he’s fighting against.”

“Nevski has not respected any kind of neutral settlement.” The younger stallion groaned. “He will raze and pillage any village his armies walk across.”

“I see.” I gulped. “So, we’re talking about a butcher.”

“More or less.” The mare nodded. “That’s why you should keep your identity hidden.”

“I understand.” I winced. “Who are you anyway? I’ve told you my name, but you’re keeping yours concealed.”

“I’m Stranded Flame, Sergeant Major, 5th Infantry Corps of the New Equestrian Republic Army.” The older stallion saluted. “I was made prisoner two weeks ago, after an echelon of Tsardom troops managed to encircle our outpost.”

“My name is Static Flicker, Corporal, 2nd Engineer Corps.” The younger stallion nodded gently. “My story is similar to that of Flame’s. We were sent to repair some trenches in the outskirts of Camp Manefield, and the Tsar’s ponies managed to break through our lines. I was captured alive, instead of being killed.”

“And I am Dynamite Storm, First Class Trooper, Demolition Corps.” The mare winked. “Those bastards got me while our team was trying to deploy a minefield in a crag pass.”

“You’re all troopers, then?” I asked. “Are we prisoners of war of some sort?”

“I wish I could say that.” Flame groaned. “In that case, I would expect some fairness in the way they treat us. However, I don’t think that will be the case.”

“Do you really believe we’re going to be sold as slaves?” Storm asked.

“Sergeant Major, with all due respect, slaves are usually collared to avoid their escape.” Flicker frowned. “This doesn’t seem to be the case.”

“Where are you going to escape to, Flicker?” Flame laughed ironically. “If you managed to sneak out of the settlement, there’s only one way to go, and that’s straight into the frontline, which incidentally has the largest density of Tsardom troops per square meter of the whole Wasteland.”

“What about Lake Honeymead?” I asked. “That would be a possible escape route.”

“We already discussed that earlier.” Storm grinned sadly. “We wouldn’t be able to swim through the lake in our condition. We would drown before we made it to the other end. Besides, once on the west bank, we would have to walk until we found a settlement.”

“Understood.” I shrugged. “But, you must be looking for a way out of this place.”

“We have tried...” Flicker sighed. “But the security is very tight here. As much as we’d love to run away, it’s just impossible.”

“Have you given up?” I groaned. “That doesn’t speak well of the mighty armies of the Republic.”

“Screw the mighty armies.” Flame spat. “We’re just foals on the run right now, if you haven’t noticed. Ever since we met Nevski in the battle of Des Manes, he’s been harassing our asses until Hooper Dam. No more glorious conquests for the banner of the two unicorns!”

“Don’t be like that, Flame!” Storm cried. “They’ll rescue us!”

“I honestly doubt that.” Flame shook his head.

“That’s how all our conversations end.” Flicker shrugged. “We are trapped here, depending on aid that will never come. I’m afraid to tell you that it will be your fate as well.”

“Really?” I winced. “Listen, if life has taught me something is that fate is something that won’t govern me. I have worked my way from the bottom to the top, and I intend to do something similar here. I will manage to break out of wherever we are, and if you wish, I will take you with me!”

“Those are pretty bold statements, Farsight.” Flame snickered. “I will forgive you because you have no idea of where we’re at right now. As soon as you get the feel of everyday life in this place, you will realize that there is little you can do to get out.”

“I have to agree with the Sergeant Major on that one.” Flicker nodded. “Forget about any trace of logic here, Farsight. The Tsardom handles things brutally, and any attempt to reason with them is silenced by a gun or a blade.”

“Trust me, every single pony can be bent.” I smiled.

“Not with Nevski around.” Flame replied coarsely.

“I won’t give up without trying.” I shook my head.

“Then good luck, Farsight.” Flicker mumbled. “It has been a pleasure to meet you.”

“Why so grim?” I asked. “Is it that bad?”

“Just wait and see.” Storm winced.

“See what?”

“ALRIGHT EVERYPONY, TIME TO GET TO WORK!”

A voice boomed, and the door opened harshly, letting two armored ponies in. The guards that walked into our little hideout wore ornate metal armors in silver and green, all decorated with motifs of dragon scales, spikes and fangs. I had a flashback of that day eight years ago, when Nadyr and I fought another pony in a similar attire on our way to Neighorleans. Could it be that the Tsardom had been there all the time?

“Well, well, it seems like our latest acquisition has finally woken up.” The two Tsardom ponies walked to me, looking at me closely. “How are we feeling today, sleeping beauty?”

Careful, Farsight, I thought. These are nothing more than a band of ruthless, merciless killers, and they won’t take irony like the ponies in New Pegasus. Watch your muzzle, or you might be in real trouble.

“I can stand on my hooves, if that’s what you’re asking.” I replied with a gentle smile.

“I can see that.” The guard snickered. “The question is... can you work?”

“Well, that depends, really.”

“On what?” The other guard replied irately. Careful, don’t be too smart.

“On the kind of job you want me to do.” I continued calmly. “I realize that I don’t have much of a choice, but I have to try.” I shrugged.

“Try what?”

“Well, the Wasteland has taught me what I’m good at and what I’m terrible at, and frankly, if my fate is to work hard for you, at least I’d like to do something I am proficient at.”

“Reeeeeeally.” The guard smiled cunningly. “Please do tell me, what are you good at, apart from speaking?”

“Well, as a professional scavenger, I can handle myself in tasks of exploration and mapmaking, as well as treasure hunting. Besides, life in the Wasteland has made me a proficient sniper.”

“A scavenger and a sniper. Of course.” The guard coughed. “And what the fuck do you think that Vojvode Nevski would do with a scavenger or a sniper? It’s either the mines or the frontlines for you, prick!”

I gulped. None of the two options were of my liking, but the second one showed at least a faint chance of deserting and making a run for freedom. If I chose the mines, whatever that meant, I wouldn’t have a single chance of returning home. In the frontlines, at least I could cling to the hope of making it past NER lines.

“In that case, I think I’ll choose the frontlines. At least I can handle a gun better than a pickaxe.”

“Who says you’ll be holding a gun?” The guard grinned malevolently, while he and his companion dragged us out of the room.

“What about them?” I asked, pointing at the troopers.

“Those are going to the Arena. That’s what happens to the ponies that cross Vojvode Nevski.”

“The Arena?”

“Yes, the Arena.” The guard pushed me forward. “Now shut up if you don’t want to end there too.”

I gulped and nodded. Even if I didn’t know what the Arena was, even its name had a vibe of death and brutality infused into it. Frankly, I didn’t want to be sentenced to whatever the fate of the Republican ponies was, so I held my mouth shut and walked on. Things were indeed brutal under the rule of the Tsar.

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I was taken to a sort of boot camp, at the outskirts of the ruined town in which the forces of the Tsar had established their settlement. It was a vast esplanade, filled with obstacle courses and rubber-coated wood dummies simulating Republican trooper ponies. A dirty group of prisoners trotted up and down the dusty field, in what seemed to be an endurance test, as they all looked battered and about to collapse. The guards dragged me to a scarred stallion with no left eye that wore a feathered collar on top of the Tsardom armor, then turned around and disappeared. The one-eyed buck began to walk up and down, looking at me from his only healthy eye, while evaluating my capabilities.

“Well, well, well, seems like I have been given another meat puppet. It’s my lucky day.” He chuckled.

“What’s your name?”

“My name’s Indigo Snow, sir.” I replied firmly. Indigo Snow? I had no idea where that name had come from, but there it was.

“Ooh, an educated one.” The Tsardom pony laughed. “What am I going to do with you, tenderhoof?”

“Don’t assume I’m a tenderhoof, sir.” I said coldly. “I’ve lived for many years in the Wasteland.”

“Then how do you explain your metal hindlegs?”

“A strike of luck, sir.” I gulped. “That’s all. I happened to be rescued by a chapter of Steel Rangers who felt pity of me when they found me wounded in the Wasteland.”

“Really. A chapter of Steel Rangers.”

“Right as I tell you, sir.” I shrugged. “I can’t expect you to believe it, but that is the truth.”

“And the PipBuck?”

“Family keepsake, sir. My father gave it to me, but he wouldn’t tell me where it came from.”

“Whatever.” The one-eyed pony groaned. “Mister Snow, you are nothing more than a maggot. I would even call you a fucking maggot, but since you’re so educated, let’s keep our standards high. You have been captured by the glorious army of the Tsar, and because of that, you are going to join his ranks in one of his frontline platoons. My job here is to turn you from a maggot to a valid soldier for the Tsar and Vojvode Nevski’s plans.”

“Good, I like it when I get things explained clearly.” I smiled.

“Shut up, maggot!” He roared. “You are nothing but an expendable piece, useless meat that will be thrown

against the despicable forces of the NER. If you want to survive, you'll learn to fight face to face, hoof to hoof, or you will die in the process. The Tsar doesn't want snipers, he wants ponies with a taste for blood! Do you understand, maggot?"

"Yes, sir." I gulped.

"Then get a move on! Go, go, go!"

I pranced at his order and began marching through the dust, with the drill instructor following me closely. My body was still weary from my crash and whatever they had done to me, but my mind realized what happened to the prisoners made by the Tsardom. Every pony that had the bad luck of being captured by Nevski's advancing army was given the choice to work at the mines or to enlist as frontline soldiers, that is, meat puppets meant to flood Republican posts to the West. In a sense, we were not slaves, as we had chose our destiny, and that way, the Tsar could get an almost endless supply of troops. No matter whose idea it was, I had to admit it was cunning and frankly effective.

"Faster, you maggot!"

Suddenly, I felt as if a line of fire had been drawn in my back, and I heard the characteristic sound of a whip cracking the air. The pain made me huff for air, and I almost lost my balance in the gallop. Tears began to flood my eyes and I had to clench my teeth to avoid screaming. After all that time living in comfort and luxury, the bare reality of the unforgiving Wasteland had become almost mythical to me, but there I was, experiencing it directly.

"I told you to move faster! You'll be torn to shreds if you gallop so slowly!"

"But I..." I gasped.

"No talking!"

Another whiplash could be heard, and my back ignited in pain once again. I could feel the blood slowly dripping down my body, making the rags stick to the fur, and the tears flowed from my eyes. I did nothing to stop them, and I concentrated on galloping faster. It was the only way not to be tortured by the drill instructor. However, what I couldn't avoid was to miscalculate a step and trip over, falling headfirst into the ground.

"Get up, maggot!"

I didn't want to. Frankly, I didn't even care if the drill instructor was about to whip me once again. I just didn't feel like getting back up to endure more torture. As far as I was concerned, I could die there, betrayed and alone. How foolish of me, when I tried to convince the NER prisoners to help me escape. They were right when they said that there was no way of getting out of that place!

Suddenly, a voice inside me warned me, told me not to give up. There were ponies that genuinely cared for me, and for which I had to live. There would be a way out, there always was; but to find it I had to get up and keep fighting. I realized that the little voice inside my mind was right, and I forced myself to get back on my hooves, despite the lacerating pain of my back.

"I see you're strong-willed. I like that!" The drill instructor laughed. "Very few prisoners get up after two whips to their backs."

"Do I... keep running?" I panted.

"No, let's try something else. Come."

I followed the one-eyed pony back to the dummy area, where he threw me a makeshift sword. I caught it with my magic and balanced it to the sides, getting the feel of it. I had never fought with such a weapon, except that time when I slit the throats of two guards during the Ferratura uprising. I had used a glass shard that was much lighter than the coarse steel sword I had been given.

"You're a unicorn, so I guess you'll handle yourself quite well with one of these. If you had been an earth pony, I would have tied a lance to your side and would have sent you to phalanx training. Anyway, get to the dummy and show me what you can do!"

Frankly, I didn't like the idea of having to fight from close range, as I enjoyed the battles from a distance and through the comfort of a scope, but I was starting to believe that if I managed to get on the good side of the instructor, I would be able to make some progress. I walked close to the dummy, holding the sword straight before me, and without warning, I thrust the blade to the dummy's throat, sticking it deep into the rubber cover.

"Nice, nice!" The instructor pranced. "Right to the jugular vein! I like your style."

"Thank you." I stuck the blade out of the dummy and sent a sideways slash while jumping back. I was starting to like it, but then again, I wasn't fighting a real opponent.

"You are skillful, you know. Have you handled swords before?"

"Not really. I'm just a quick learner, and I used to be a sniper, so I know where to aim at."

"There is something you must watch out for, though, maggot." The instructor groaned. "If your blade gets stuck in the enemy's body, let's say that it gets buried in a bone, you'll be done for. Go for the soft spots, and slash rather than thrust."

"I understand. What now?"

"Keep training. I'll get you some gear."

I nodded and kept thrusting and recoiling, sending vertical and horizontal slashes at the rubber-coated dummy, while I smiled cautiously. It looked like I was actually managing to take a place within all that military apparatus, and with some luck, I would be sent to the frontlines. Once there, it would be a matter of time until I could manage to sneak out and reach my side of the world.

"Here you are." The drill instructor said. "OK, fellas, take him away!"

"What?" I roared, as two hulking ponies in armor grabbed me. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the Arena, of course." The one-eyed pony smirked. "You have proved that you can withstand pain and that you are good with a sword."

"Wait a minute! Didn't you say I was going to be sent to the frontlines?"

"I did, but I didn't tell you the truth, that's how it goes." He spat and grinned mischievously. "You can't possibly believe that a pony fallen from the skies goes unnoticed by Vojvode Nevski, did you? He requested you at the Arena personally... I believe he wants to see what a pony of your kind can do."

"Couldn't he just have summoned me to his... office, or whatever?"

"Ha ha, no. Vojvode Nevski wants to know if you're worthy of being summoned to an audience. That's why you're starring at the Arena. Double time, soldiers!"

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I was dragged to an elliptical construction made out of scrap metal and wood, high as an apartment building, and three times as broad. The place looked imposing as hell, and I could feel my spirits plummet as we crossed a dark archway into the bowels of the Arena. Once inside, we walked through dimly illuminated corridors, in which the moans of the wounded and the prayers of those to fight could be heard clearly. I had to push myself to the very limit to stand calm in the atmosphere of violence that surrounded me.

The guards tossed me in a small holding cell, where there was nothing more than a haystack to act as a mattress and a tiny hole in the dirt to be used for numbers one and two. This was no luxury hotel, but then again, it was reasonable to think that the ponies that inhabited these chambers didn't do it for too long. I tried to make myself comfortable in the pile of hay, while my magic fiddled with the sword at a safe distance. Whatever my future was meant to be, it would be done by the tip of that weapon, and not by means of my wits and tongue, so I'd better get ready for the unknown.

Once all had settled down, I began to feel the lacerating pain of my back, as well as the anger bubbling inside me. All of this was, in a way, Avro's fault. If I hadn't followed her into that crazy campaign against the Red Front, I would still be sitting comfortably on my couch, watching the world revolve around me and deciding

my next moves. Instead, I was wounded and held prisoner by a bunch of lunatics who would have me fight for my life. I was scared, yes, but that fear channeled itself as rage instead of blocking me as it had done before. All of my life was still there, still close for me to reach, and I just had to find a way of getting out. However, each and every turn of events put more and more distance between me and my goals.

“Avro, why?” I moaned.

It was a stupid question, but somehow, it made me feel better. Of course I would get no answer, apart from a smug or violent retort from one of my neighbors, but my soul needed to let go some steam. She was the source of all my problems, but instead of wanting her dead or away from my life, I wanted her close. I needed her close. That paradox was making me go absolutely nuts, trying to find a tradeoff solution.

Another thing that nagged in the back of my head was who had actually downed our gunship in our way back from Breakeven Point. According to Petlyakov, the attack had to come from the ground, but we were flying over Republican territory at the time. Could that actually mean that the NER was aware of our dealings with Ilyushin’s group, and that they had considered Avro’s uprising a rebellion against their rule? Could that put the City of New Pegasus in jeopardy? Once again, I blamed Avro for that, but in the very deep, I was blaming myself for not being able to see through her treacherous ways. I could have dismissed her as I had dismissed so many other mares after a quick shag, and yet, I didn’t. I fell for her as I had fallen for Stuka, but the griffin was honorable and fair. I supposed that, in the end, it was my memories of the time we had spent together what drove me towards Avro.

“Why did you have to do that?” I sighed. “Why wouldn’t I listen to Rose?”

Poor Rose, I thought. Where would she be at the moment? Pet should have arrived at New Pegasus with the grim news... What would happen to her? What about Nadyr? Would they begin to search me through the Wasteland, or would they ignore me and carry on? In the very end, I could expect the half-zebra to do that, but knowing Rose, I had the feeling that she would do the utmost to bring me back. Getting me out of Nevski’s camp, however, was something completely out of her reach.

I also wondered who that Nevski fellow could be. It was a funny name for a pony, but then again, so were Ilyushin, Petlyakov or Avro. Such a brilliant commander coming out of nowhere was something odd, even for the Wasteland. Legends always dart through the wastes, and somepony with the abilities of Nevski should have been known by almost every foal from here to Canterlot. Instead, his actions had been a total surprise, and that was what had brought the Tsar’s army right into the gates of New Pegasus.

Suddenly, the sound of hooves against the floor brought me back from my thoughts. The door opened and two armored guards walked into the room.

“Indigo Snow?” They asked.

“Err... yes.” I had almost forgotten my cover. “What is it?”

“Time for you to fight. Get up!”

I didn’t wait for them to force me, and as quickly as I could I got back onto my four hooves, my pain still hurting from the wounds caused by the whip. Blood had already caked on them, and I could feel the tension on my coat as I moved. They would definitely leave a scar, although that was the least of my worries. I walked out of the small holding cell, surrounded by the two armored hulks of flesh, while holding the sword I had been given in a futile attempt of clinging to something.

“So... what’s the fight like?” I asked nervously.

“It’s a fight.” The guard replied dryly. “You and other ponies fight to the death, and if the Vojvode likes you, you might get out of the Arena alive.”

“I see...” I mumbled. “And who will I be fighting?”

“Frankly, I have no idea.” The other guard shrugged. “I’m tasked to bring you to the arena, that’s all. Once I’ve done that, I plan to go to the canteen for a beer. I don’t like the fights, to be honest.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. I don’t like them. Period.” The guards left me in front of a barred door. “Now, when the bars lift, you walk out and give them hell, alright?”

I nodded and gulped, as the two guards turned around and left me alone with my pathetic little sword in front of a barred gate that led to a place of death and suffering, as the roar of what sounded like an enraged audience began to grow in my ears. Cheering, wailing and stomping curled into an eldritch symphony that appealed to the deepest instincts of ponykind echoed across the whole building. Suddenly, the voice of a single pony, a young stallion, rose above the cacophony of noises, probably amplified by a sound system.

“Good day to all of you, my fellow subjects of the Tsar!”

The crowd responded with a cheer.

“Are you ready for another fight to the death? Do you want to see the enemies of His Magnificence maim and destroy themselves just for your amusement?”

A solid “YEAH!” was the reply of the exalted crowd. I couldn’t help to shake a bit at the prospect of having to maim and destroy... or be maimed and destroyed.

“Well, I am pleased as punch to announce you that our always bright Vojvode, the terrible Nevski, has decided to grant us a four-way match as a celebration for our latest advances in Hooper Dam!”

Four way match? Really? I was hoping to fight one pony at a time, not three of them. I shook in dismay and grasped my sword tighter. Whatever was to happen out there, it would have to be bloody and violent. I had no moral qualms towards violence, as I had exerted it many times in the past, but this situation meant actual danger to my hide.

“So hold on tight to your seats and get ready to enjoy the most brutal show this side of the world has yet to offer!”

Okay, that announcer was starting to get on my nerves. He knew which words to use to make me feel uneasy, that was for certain.

“Coming from the skies above us, he’s the living mystery, the pony with metal instead of flesh, the mighty warrior of origin unknown! This is our Vojvode’s present to you, the one and only Indigo Snow!”

The bars opened, and I walked outside, frightened but determined to fight for my life. I found myself staring at a ring of ponies’ faces, most of them clad in dragon-shaped armors, roaring at me, claiming for my blood to be spilt on the sand, almost foaming from their muzzles, while others looked at a throne built on one of the sides of the ring, an elevated plinth on which a distinctive individual was sitting. All in him reminded of a dragon: his helmet had the shape of a dragon head, his armor resembled the spine and wings of such beast, and the tail was clad in a shiny long spike of metal that coiled and uncoiled rhythmically. That had to be Vojvode Nevski himself, and as the NER troopers had told me, there was no way of telling who or what stood beneath the plating. Everything in him or her was concealed.

“To face him, we have three prisoners that refused to accept their place in the glorious order of the Tsar! Three stupid ponies who preferred their ill-fated ideals over their lives! These miscarried individuals are here to be tested, and if they defeat the skytraveller, they will earn a second chance to integrate in our magnificent society!”

So it was a three-on-one, not a free for all four pony match. So much for my hopes of survival. Another barred gate opened, and I found myself facing at my former cellmates Storm, Flicker and Flame. They winced when they realized it was me who they were going to fight, and I couldn’t help feeling disgusted as well. I wouldn’t have cared if I had been faced with three anonymous ponies, but these were known to me. I had spoken to them before, and they did look like fine chaps. Nevski had a macabre sense of humour indeed.

“Let’s get ready to rumbleeeeeeeee!!!” The announcer roared one last time, and the fight was on.

I looked at the three NER soldiers that were about to fight me, and I couldn’t help to shrug and smile sadly. I was delivering a message in the likes of “hey, I have nothing against you, but it’s you or me”, and I guessed that they understood it, because I was replied by similar smiles before they moved into combat stances.

Storm's face couldn't hide the sadness of having to fight somepony that she knew, but her moves showed that she wouldn't stop because of that. She advanced cautiously, slowly drifting to my right side, with the blade tightly clenched in her muzzle, while she kept eye contact with me.

Flicker, on the other hoof, showed no emotions in his face, just a blank expression while his blade swung from side to side, enveloped in a haze of green magic. He advanced towards my left flank, in a clear pincer move, showing that the three troopers had been tasked to slay me in order to be saved. What I didn't yet understand was the interest that Nevski had in seeing me dead, assuming that he didn't know who I really was. Because he didn't know... or did he?

Flame showed unconcealed anger towards me, his teeth clenched tightly while the sword he had been given floated steadily at his side. He was going for me head on, without any subtlety or elaborate tactic; but then again, this was no dance hall. We were fighting to the death, hoof to hoof and blade against blade. The grizzled stallion looked like a fearsome opponent, but I had been faced with greater dangers and I had overcome. I needed to pull that off once again.

"Things are about to get ugly!" The announcer chimed. "Prepare yourselves, as this might be over quickly!"

As soon as the voice in the speakers went silent, the audience cheered like crazy, while Storm and Flicker charged at me from both sides. It was a standard tactic, trying to block an opponent's movement by pushing from various fronts at once, but I had my rear free, so I leapt backward, dodging the attacks of the two ponies. I trusted to be able to handle them one by one, but at that stage of the fight, my only worry was not to get blindsided by any of my opponents.

"Indigo Snow dodges the first attack!" The announcer narrated each and every one of my moves. It was becoming quite annoying, but I had other more pressing issues to solve. "He's agile and capable, that's for sure!"

Flicker sent his blade thrusting against me, like a sharp and cutting projectile, forcing me to swing to one side, since there was no way of blocking that much energy. It seems like I reacted a second too late, as I felt the sword cutting my flesh and the blood dripping off it. I took a peek while the audience went crazy, but despite the pain it was sending through my body, I realized that it only was a surface cut, not deeper than the wounds caused by that bloody whip.

"And one of the troopers gets first blood!" The announcer roared. "How long will it take for Indigo Snow to take the fall?"

You keep dreaming, stupid announcer. I groaned and breathed deep to fight the pain. It was no deep wound, nothing that would stop me from fighting, but it did hurt quite a lot. Flicker was still sending thrusts of his blade against me, but now that they were slower and more predictable, I had begun blocking them one by one. To be an engineer, he knew how to fight in close range, I had to admit that; and besides, being entangled in a battle with him prevented me of keeping an eye on Flame and Storm.

"It seems like Indigo Snow is on a tight spot right now!"

I grumbled a swear word while keeping my eyes on Flicker's expressionless face, while our blades clashed in midair in a cacophony of twangs and clangs. I needed to keep up with his pace, thrusting, blocking and slashing at the right time; as if we were performing some sort of macabre dance of death. Meanwhile, I began to see something in the corner of my eye, the lean figure of a mare who was creeping from behind me, so I took a quick glance at my E.F.S. Indeed, there was one hostile almost at bucking range behind me, while a second one kept a safe distance and moved in circles.

"That's it, just a bit closer..." I hissed, while deflecting another thrust by Flicker.

The red dot advanced one step, then another... enough to be within my range. Storm was counting on catching me by surprise, but I was already ahead of her. As soon as she got close enough, I used all my force and all the power of my augmentations to buck the mare in the face. A loud crack let me know that my hit had connected, and judging by Flicker's sudden gasp, it hadn't been pretty. I did a circle slash and rolled away from the younger stallion, trying to take a look at the consequences of my attack.

Storm had been hit right on the face, as a consequence of which her muzzle had bent in a funny angle and blood flowed out of her nostrils and mouth. She was groggy, drifting from side to side, and most importantly, she was defenceless, since her only way of grasping a weapon was to bite it hard; and she was in no biting condition. I turned around and tried to advance towards the downed mare, in an attempt to deliver the killing blow, while the audience went absolutely nuts.

“One of the troopers is down! Will Indigo Snow end with her life now, or will he enjoy the moment?”

I galloped towards Storm, who still was dizzy, and prepared to send my blade right into her throat, when something struck me from the side and made me recoil. Flame had arrived to aid his wounded partner, looking at me with fire in his eyes.

“Get away from her!” He roared.

“This is a fight to the death, Flame!” I replied in the same tone. “It’s either you or me, and I intend to live on beyond today!”

Flame wailed at the top of his voice and charged, with his blade dangerously swinging from side to side. I rolled to avoid his attack, but I felt the sword cut my face, sending waves of excruciating pain through my body. I yelled and got up as quickly as possible, while my rage and the pumping adrenaline made me forget about the burning gash in my cheek. Flame was still recovering from that last charge, and he couldn’t avoid my sword cutting through the tendons of his hindleg. With a bloodchilling wail, the old and bulky stallion lost balance and fell to the floor, bleeding profusely from his severed leg.

“That’s one surgeon strike by the mysterious Indigo Snow!” The announcer cheered. “I told you this pony meant business!”

I gazed quickly upon the battlefield. Storm was recovering from my attack, but her muzzle was still cracked and she had no way of holding the sword straight. Flame was lying on the floor right beside me, with his hindleg almost cut apart and almost incapable of getting back up. Flicker was the only trooper standing, but my latest moves seemed to have mined his confidence, as he was reluctant to advance towards me. The younger stallion seemed about to start shaking in fear, and I couldn’t help to smile. I had the upper hoof once again.

“Scared, Flicker?” I smiled.

“N-no.” He tried to stay calm.

“Well, you should be.” I said sternly, while sending my blade right through Flame’s heart, who died with a loud moan.

I didn’t break eye contact with the young Republican soldier while I sunk my sword into Stranded Flame’s lying body, nor when I pulled it out again, covered in crimson blood almost to the hilt. I was playing with his mind, showing him that I was determined to end with his life and that I would even have a good time doing it. I was no sadist, and I wasn’t enjoying the fact of having to kill three fine ponies, but I had to do what I had to do to survive. Moral qualms were out of the question there.

“And Iiiiindigo Snow gets his first victim of the match!” The announcer went crazy. “Will the remaining two opponents be able to stop him?”

The audience replied with a loud roar, showing clearly that they were enjoying the display of brutality and violence that we were giving them. There was no time to be sheepish about the ways of these ponies. If I wanted to live another day, I had to take Storm and Flicker out, and I had to do it without a single moment of doubt, so I walked calmly towards the younger stallion. Storm had a broken muzzle, so she wouldn’t be able to exert force with it. I would have to be careful, but she was less of a threat.

“Well, well, Flicker.” I grinned. “It’s you and me now, one on one.”

“Y-you... you’re a murderer!” He stuttered.

“Am I?”

“Yes, you are!”

“Flicker, does it look like I have a chance?” I swung my head from side to side. “Look around you, these ponies want blood, and it will either be yours or mine. Call me a murderer if you wish, but it’s either that or being dead. Now, raise your sword and fight me!”

Flicker obeyed my order and sent a doubtful thrust against my wounded face, which I quickly blocked with my blade. I grinned and replied with a horizontal slash that he barely managed to sway, while the audience screamed for blood. Our blades entangled in a one-on-one fight, slashing, thrusting, blocking and slashing again, hitting air or metal, trying to strike pony flesh as if they were hungry for it. One of my thrusts landed on his face, cutting his cheek in a similar way as Flame had cut mine, and he replied with a prompt slash that opened a long horizontal wound in my chest. It wasn’t deadly, but it hurt a lot and bled profusely. My main worry now was to make the fight as quick as possible, with the hope of getting some medical assistance later. I had no guarantee for that, and maybe Nevski wanted to use me as target practice, but I had the feeling that if I put up a good show, they would save me for a second helping. Besides, the one-eyed drill instructor had mentioned that the Vojvode himself wanted an audience with me, if I proved myself worthy.

“We’re witnessing a duel of minds here!” The announcer roared. “Have you seen the swordplay? Keep your eyes open, for one never knows what might happen next!”

I barely got a glimpse of it, but I knew it was the way to go. Flicker left his left side unguarded after each attack, giving me a window to strike at him cleanly. It was risky, because a miss would leave me totally open, and I didn’t expect him to miss such an opportunity. I remained calm, shifting my weight to the right side, while Flicker prepared to launch another thrust. The young stallion didn’t notice my change of stance and sent the blade forward, to which I rolled to the left side and launched my sword against his exposed neck. Blood sprayed out of the open wound like a fountain of crimson, staining me in a shower of the red fluid, while the poor sod fell to the floor in agony.

“Sorry, Flicker. It was either your hide or mine.” I mumbled.

“Indigo Snow takes another life!” The announcer claimed. “Have you seen such a proficient warrior? He’s only one enemy away of victory now!”

The blood-thirsty crowd went nuts with the display of violence and gore, and I turned my head to the last remaining pony. Storm had already shaken the concussion off, and was trying to hold the sword straight while looking at me with pure hatred in her eyes. I was no longer a fellow prisoner of the Tsar, but a bloody killer who had slain two of her colleagues and was intending to do the same to her. I understood those feelings, but I also knew that they were a mistake in our circumstances. It was not a matter of allegiances of friendships, our situation was that of every pony for himself. Live killing, or die in the process. More or less, it was the logic of the Wasteland.

Storm advanced clumsily towards me, trying to keep the blade from falling off her broken and bloody muzzle. She looked simply pathetic, fighting a lost battle. In other circumstances, I would have pleaded for her life, trying to reason that there was no honor or glory in killing a pony who could barely defend herself. If I had been surrounded by more civilized individuals, I would have tried to use my charisma to obtain a better outcome. However, I was very far from civilization as I knew it, so I would have to resort to more basic ways of getting things sorted out.

“I am deeply sorry, Storm.” I lowered my head.

“Sorry?” She hissed, her remaining teeth clenched against the reinforced hilt of the sword. “For what?”

“For this.” I replied, while ramming the sword in a down-to-up motion, punching through the lower end of her jaw and thrusting against the brain. Magic allowed me to do such nifty moves.

She didn’t even see it coming, and her eyes turned lifeless the very moment the metal reached its target. Her jaw dropped, letting the sword roll to the floor, and her legs held her for one second before he hit the dust. The crowd snapped and began roaring in a mixture of joy and rage, cheering for the show they had witnessed and complaining for its prompt end. I walked to the center of the Arena, gazing at Nevski from the distance, while the announcer called my fake name again and again.

“Indigo Snow is the winner!” He cried. “He’s taken out three battle-hardened ponies all by himself!”

I smiled and went on with the show. They wanted a fearsome Arena warrior, and I would give them such a character. I guess that I could have been an actor, had I been born under different circumstances. I lifted my blood-soaked sword in the air and walked around confidently, frowning at the audience.

“What’s wrong, Arena?” I roared. “Are you not entertained?”

The ponies in the seats pranced and roared.

“I can’t hear you? Is this not of your liking? ARE YOU NOT HAVING FUN?”

“We certainly are.” A loud voice boomed, but it wasn’t that of the announcer. It sounded deep and concealed, distorted by something that stood between the speaker and the microphone. It had to be Nevski.

I turned around and gazed at the throne where the Vojvode had witnessed the whole combat. The mysterious pony was now standing proud on the edge of his privileged site, while another pony in a dragon armor held a microphone close to his head.

“Indigo Snow, you have proven yourself to be a mighty warrior, intelligent and deadly. You have managed to overcome the grim odds that I have thrown against you and you have given my soldiers a show that they will never forget. I would like to meet you personally.”

“I’ll be honored, mighty Vojvode.” I replied, bowing. One couldn’t be cautious enough.

“Then leave this Arena, warrior. I’ll have you summoned promptly.”

The whole audience cheered the name of the masked pony, as he turned around and left the Arena. The two guards who had dragged me out of the cell appeared beside me and without leaving me time to think, they picked me up and pushed me back into the dark corridors of the building.

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I had been waiting for several hours in the dark cell of the Arena, and the promise that Nevski had made was starting to sound stale and fake. My only visit had been that of a mare who had healed my wounds poorly and had offered herself as a trophy for the winner. I was tired and in pain, but I had a go with her anyway. The last thing I wanted to do was to enrage my captors even more. Still, while I was on top of her, I couldn’t stop thinking about Avro, about her beautiful body, about her lovely mane... and about her treason.

My mind was still torn between my love for her and my will to enact revenge on her, and being captive in the halls of that murky building was not helping me clear my mind. Getting away was my only hope, and for that, I needed to convince Nevski to send me to the frontlines. Once there, I would wait for the chance for a quick defection, and I would run back to New Pegasus as fast as my hooves could move me. However, the first step wasn’t taking place, and that played with my nerves.

“Oi, Indigo Snow!” A voice called, while the cell door opened. “Nevski wants to see you.”

“Finally.” I sighed, getting back on my hooves.

“Watch your muzzle, Snow.” The guard warned. “Nevski doesn’t like fancy-talkers. He just cuts their tongues off.”

I gulped and fell silent. Whoever this Nevski fellow was, he had an aura of dread that made him simply fearsome. I simply didn’t know how I was going to handle him, or which his intentions towards me were. However, that audience with the mighty Vojvode was my only hope to get away from that horrible place. I breathed deep and followed the guards out of the dark and horrible Arena where I had been forced to kill to survive, hoping never to return there again.

As we walked down the streets of the ruined town the Tsar’s forces had occupied as their camp, I noticed that many faces turned as we passed by. Obviously, my feats in the battlefield had not gone unnoticed for most of the soldiers that inhabited that camp, and the name Indigo Snow was already well known among the troops. Some cheered, some stomped the floor, and some even wanted to shake my hoof. In the blink of an eye, I had become a bit of a celebrity in the place.

The guards drove me to a villa that stood on the outskirts of the camp, a classical building with columns of wood and arches of brick everywhere, into what I guessed was Nevski's private hideout. Banners with the emblem of the dragon were everywhere, and most of them sported a large 'H' beneath them. I assumed that had to be the Vojvode's personal symbol, and that was the reason why it was portrayed in most of the standards and garlands in the area.

I was driven to an elegant-looking wood-paneled room, where the mysterious masked commander was waiting, looking at a sizzling fireplace. When I was pushed into the room, he turned around and made a gurgling laughing noise, that sounded even more eldritch due to the mask he was wearing.

"Leave us alone, please." He said.

"Of course, Vojvode." The guard bowed. "We'll be here if you need anything."

The guards left and closed the door behind them, leaving me alone with the masked pony. I gulped and stood in silence, waiting for him to start the conversation. The warning issued about the fancy-talkers had made me be far more cautious.

"Well, well, well. Indigo Snow." He said calmly. "Tell me, my brave warrior, how did you end up here?"

"With all due respect, oh magnificent one, I do believe you already know the story."

"Of course I do, but I only know the basics." Nevski laughed. "I want to hear the full story coming from your lips, Indigo Snow."

"It's a long and convoluted story, your highness."

"Don't worry, I have patience." Nevski made himself comfortable. "And trust me when I tell you that I've had my share of convoluted stories in my life."

"Of course, my Vojvode." I cleared my throat. "My story is not so different from any other here in the Wasteland. I was born on the wilds, and I had to learn to survive by myself. The years have taught me well, and I can say with pride that I lived comfortably scavenging for treasure and hunting for food and profit."

"Ah yes, I heard that before." Nevski made a laughing sound. "It's surprising how much the Wasteland has to offer to those who know where to look at. But please, carry on."

"As I was saying, I managed to reach a certain balance in my life. Scavenging, hunting, trading and exploring the wastes made my everyday routine. I had my hardships, that is true, but they were something that one could expect from a world as unforgiving as this."

"Naturally. The Wasteland separates the strong from the weak." Nevski hummed. "Now, I see that your hindlegs seem to be encased in some sort of armor... would you tell me where you got that from?"

"As I warned you before, your highness, this is one of those times the story gets a little convoluted. I was searching through an old bunker some years ago, looking for whatever I could find, when I came across a group of Steel Rangers. Luckily for me, they were of the peaceful kind, and we agreed to cooperate and split the earnings: technology for them, other goods for me."

"How odd for a group of Rangers." Nevski coughed.

"Odd indeed, but when life gives you a chance you must grab it. We investigated the bunker, triggering its automated defences in the process. One of the turrets blew one of my hindlegs off while I protected one of the Scribes, and in return for that action, the medic-engineer of the team installed this thing in my legs."

"How chivalrous of them." Nevski ironized.

"I don't know what drove them to do that, but the thing is that I owe my life to them."

"Of course. Spare the kind words, Indigo Snow, and tell me how you got into an airship."

"That is another part that is difficult to believe, my Vojvode. I seem to have acquired the ability to snoop in the most dangerous places, as I happened to stumble into a pegasus airbase while I was exploring a large cave. Of course, I was made prisoner, but I managed to sneak out and start one small airship. I know my way

with machines, so I managed to get out of there. What I had never done before was piloting one of those crazy machines, and I ended up crashing in the lake. That's when you found me... and that's how my story ends."

"Does it?" Nevski chuckled.

"Well, I'm in your clutches now, your highness. It's not like I have much of a story left."

"You see, Indigo Snow, I'm not a butcher as ponies from the other side of the Dam tend to think. Or should I call you Farsight?"

My heart stopped cold. How did he know I was Farsight, if he had never seen me in my entire life? He could have heard about me, but I kept my looks away from the media, to maintain a minimum level of privacy.

"How...?" I mumbled.

"It's very simple." Nevski laughed malevolently. "In fact, it's so simple that you will not believe it."

The Vojvode unlatched his dragon-shaped helmet and slowly dragged it upward, showing a grey-green fur and a short golden mane. His eyes, lying behind a pair of glasses, were awkwardly familiar.

"Delvio?" I gasped.

It was him alright. Eight years older, and visibly damaged by the harshness of Wasteland life, but the mysterious Nevski was none other than Delvio Ferratura, who had escaped my trap the day I took over New Pegasus. I realized from the look of his eyes that I was simply done for, as he had to have been irking for revenge since the very day he was forced out of the Clops.

"Yes, Farsight, it's me." Delvio smiled. "Surprised to see me?"

"Certainly. Then again, it fits with the fact that under your command, the Tsar's army has known where to strike every time. You knew the land you were treading."

"I did, because I never forgot. I remembered each step, each breath, each wound in the process; since I knew that the day of my return would come. The day in which I would have revenge upon you, Farsight."

"Has that been your only thought these eight years?" I smirked. If I was going to die, I wanted to do it in intellectual superiority. Delvio would not see me beg for my life. "That's quite obsessive."

"Farsight, you cost me my father's life, and that of my brother, apart from all our Empire. I was forced to crawl through the sewers and to flee into the deep desert, far away from any sort of civilization, as I was scared that you would send scouting parties to find me. For weeks I walked to the East, far from New Pegasus and the ever growing power of the NER, looking for a place to lay down to recover from my wounds. I suffered disease, pain and hunger. I froze in winter, and almost died of dehydration in summer. All of that, because of you; because of your endless greed and hunger for power."

"That's how this world goes, Delvio. You should know it better than anypony, having had your own nephew killed." I shrugged.

"You're NOPONY to tell that to me!" Delvio yelled. "Who are you anyway, Farsight? A disgruntled Stable outcast who believed to have been chosen by the Goddesses to rule New Pegasus, confronting each and every pony who stood in your way?"

"Yes, I am a Stable Outcast." I groaned. "But I was chosen by nopony. I crafted my own way, through patience and hard work. I didn't inherit it like you did."

"I am amazed at you, Farsight." Delvio laughed in disdain. "You stand here, at the gates of your own death, and yet you don't lose a hint of your foolish pride."

"Why should I back down now? I don't regret any of my actions, as I'm sure you don't regret yours."

"Of course I don't!" Delvio fumed. "I was immensely lucky to find the helping hoof of his Eternal Majesty, the all-powerful Tsar, and I swore for my life that I would give him all the lands he could imagine, for him to rule and control. He gave me a purpose, he gave me a new name, and he gave me a new life. I don't regret

any single thing, for I know that victory will be mine.”

“I won’t be the one to doubt that.” I mumbled. “Allow me one question, Delvio. How did you find out it was me all along?”

“It was easy. A pony falling from the skies doesn’t go unnoticed to anypony, so I asked for your description. I wanted to find out who had been the individual capable of such feat, but I had a hunch that you had to be involved.”

“Did you?” I grinned.

“Of course I did. You have the ability to appear where you’re least expected, Farsight, so I thought that such uncanny happening had your smell all over it. I was right.”

“Then, if you knew it was me all along, why didn’t you drag me here in the first place?”

“Simple, Farsight. I wanted to see you suffer and die.” Delvio shrugged. “But then again, your persistence keeps being something close to supernatural. You managed to kill three weathered NER soldiers and you even had the pride to address the audience.”

“I was just giving them a good show.” I laughed ironically.

“You are a funny individual, Farsight. Really funny.” Delvio grimaced. “I have you here, close to me, and I could stab you, or burn you, or choke you, or have you shot. Still, I don’t want to do that.”

“Is it because of my charming personality?” I grinned.

“No, Farsight, it’s because I think I would be doing you a favour by ending your miserable existence here. I want you to suffer, and I want you to cry in pain and despair.” Delvio clenched his teeth in anger. “I’m not going to torture you, though. From all these years in exile, I’ve learnt that the true pain is that of the mind, the constant nibbling that the certainty of your failure causes in your spirit. I want you to suffer that.”

“Really?” I kept an ironic façade, even if I didn’t like how those words sounded.

“Yes, Farsight. I want you to suffer a fate like the one you made me suffer. I want you to see your beloved ones die, without you being able to do anything about it. I want you to witness how all that you’ve built over the years crumbles to dust, while another pony comes and takes your place. I want you to cry, I want you to blame yourself for your mistakes, I want you to beg for your death. And when that happens, I’ll be there to rip your heart out with my own two hooves.” Delvio ended the sentence whispering in my ear.

“I see... and how do you intend to do that?” I asked as calmly as possible.

“I’ll let you leave, alone and unscathed. I know for good that you’ll make it back to New Pegasus... and once you’re there, you will have no other chance than to wait for my armies to arrive, because they will arrive. The NER is weaker day by day, and they won’t be able to hold the tide of my forces forever. When that last line of defence is broken, Farsight, I’ll gallop straight into New Pegasus, and I shall have my revenge upon you.”

“You’re assuming a tad too much, Delvio.” I frowned. “I won’t go down without a fight.”

“I certainly know you won’t.” Delvio showed the smile of a maniac. “But even you must know that your forces are no match for mine. It’s a war you can’t win, Farsight, and even you can’t deny that.”

I gulped, because in the very deep, I knew that he was intrinsically right. If we came to the situation of Delvio and the Tsar’s forces directly threatening New Pegasus, there was very little I would be able to do. As long as the NER stood strong, though, I had time to get ready. Delvio was giving me a second chance, and I was not going to let that go that easily.

“Ah, you’re scared, Farsight. I see the fear in your eyes. You’ve finally begun to realize that there is nothing you can do about your downfall. Absolutely nothing!”

“Maybe... maybe not.” I smiled. “I’ll take your offering, though. As long as I live another day, I will have a chance to get ready.”

“Not even Celestia herself could ready you for what I will do, Farsight.” Delvio stared at me. “You’ll regret

having left a loose end with the intensity of a thousand suns.”

“We will see about that.” I groaned.

“Indeed. We will see.” Delvio put his helmet back on, showing that the interview was finally over. “Guards!”

“Yes, my Vojvode!” A guard quickly galloped into the room. Honestly, I couldn’t believe that he hadn’t been listening.

“Indigo Snow has earned my favour and his freedom after the glorious feats in the Arena. Please see that he gets out of our camp safely.”

“Of course, Vojvode Nevski.” The guard bowed. “Follow me, Indigo Snow.”

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I was driven out of the camp in the dark of the night, unarmed and wearing nothing more than dirty rags, but at least I was out of the dragon’s maws. With Delvio’s clear threat looming over my head, I began to gallop towards my safe haven, my home, my city. I needed to get there as soon as possible, in order to start preparing some sort of defensive strategy. I knew that the Republic wouldn’t last forever, and that sooner or later they would be pushed off the Dam by the ever growing forces of the Tsar, and that day would be my reckoning. That was why I had to be prepared to face them, employing all the roboponies that I had ready, as well as the aid of the NER. They were as interested as I was in stopping the Tsardom dead on its tracks.

I set a course to the north, avoiding the Dam and attempting to cross the river in a ford far enough from the battle to be able to sneak into Republican territory. Getting close to Hooper Dam would mean having to escape firefights, patrols and explosions, and I had no means of defending myself against any attack. Besides, I was weak and wounded, and all the events of the last day had left a serious strain on me. I was beginning to realize that I wasn’t in control anymore, and that I was playing against forces bigger than I had ever imagined.

The Tsardom was no longer a mysterious threat looming in the horizon, but a clear and present danger who had me and my City right in the middle of their scopes. Delvio was out for blood, and he didn’t want to destroy me only, he wanted to inflict pain in all of those who I loved. Nadyr, Rose, Avro... once again, I found myself thinking about the pegasus as I galloped through the Wasteland night. What would she be doing as I dashed home? Would she be missing me, or would she be basking in the power I had left behind? Did she really feel something about me, or was it all a big fat lie to make me her puppet? Why couldn’t she be honest with me?

What would I do with her when I came back? That was the question that kept banging in my head? Would I forgive her and act as if nothing would have happened, or would I banish her from my life? The first option was a complete lie to all of my principles, that would paint me as a complete sellout and a really bad leader. The second one would leave a permanent scar in my heart, something that would follow me to my very death, making my life disgraceful. There were no good options, apparently, so I had to choose the lesser evil.

I finally reached the ford I was looking for and jumped into the cold water. I swam with all my forces, trying to get to the other shore before being sucked by the current. I felt weak, and for a moment, I thought I was going to drown in the stream, but I managed to set hoof on the sand and crept out of the water. The effort was draining me, but I simply had to carry on. I needed to reach New Pegasus, I needed to see my friends once again, and I needed to prepare myself for what was to come.

The moon shone above me, lighting the Wasteland blue and white, and casting shadows of eldritch shapes and sizes on the ground. This world was beautiful, even in its calamitous state, and we ponies were the ones that made it ugly, always caught in our quarrels. As I galloped through known lands towards the growing lights of New Pegasus, I realized that Littlepip was right in her words. The Wasteland needed ponies that were able to transcend their selfish goals and worked for the greater good; ponies that weren’t tainted by the greed of politics or the madness of war. Ponies that harnessed the true power to make the world a better place. I wasn’t one of such ponies, but I certainly knew one that fit into that classification. If I failed, I would have to make sure that she carried on.

I arrived at the gates of New Pegasus with my heart about to burst, panting and sweating, with my knees wobbling and about to faint. However, I was home again. Even if it was late at night, there was activity in the streets, ponies going up and down, voices, laughter, life. I smiled as I began traversing the Strip towards my home at the Spire, but I noticed that everypony looked at me with an awry face. I realized that I had to look terrible, wearing those rags and heavily wounded, but I kept being Farsight, the ruler of the City.

“Oi, you! Stop it!” A voice rang. A familiar voice.

“What?” I asked, looking for the voice. “Standoff?”

“It’s Officer Standoff to you, punk! State your business!”

“My business?” I roared. “Don’t you see who you’re talking to? I am Farsight!” I even showed my Cutie Mark to prove it.

“My, my. Farsight. Of course.” Standoff grinned, as if he was enjoying the moment. “By order of the City Council, you are under arrest. You have been accused of treason and of conspiracy to take down the City Board.”

“What?” I babbled.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say will be used against you in court. You have the right to hire a lawyer, and if you can’t pay it, the City will grant you one. You have the right to notify one pony of your arrest. Have you understood your rights?”

“Y-yes.” I mumbled, completely dumbstruck.

“Good! Now get moving! You know the way to jail.”

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Note: Reputation Change

Tsardom: Wanted dead. Your head is a trophy Delvio is rooting for. Be prepared.

City of New Pegasus: Framed. For some reason, you have become a traitor for your own city.

## Chapter 24: Renegade

*“Good night, mares and gentlecolts, and thank you for being there with me through the dim hours of the very early morning! You are listening to the best radio station in Neighvada, New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, taking you through the darkness and into the light of a new day! That sounded good, I’ve got to note it down, haha! Anyway, what you just heard was one of those timeless classics that we never get tired of playing every now and then. You’ve just been listening to Sweetie Belle, singing ‘a capella’ in the grand Auditorium of Manehattan, a very, very long time before... well, before the events that changed the face of the world forever. I always love to hear these songs, they have a true soothing power, or so I think. How do you see it?”*

*Let’s move on to the news, shall we? Although, by the looks of things, these are more rumours than news. It appears that something is going on in the City Council, and when I say something, I mean something not good. We lack any sort of confirmation, but it seems that the former unity of the members of the Board has broken down. Some speak of disarray, some others mention the word rivalries, and there are some that overtly talk about treason! Could it be that the strong Government who has brought us to an age of prosperity and growth has finally broken under the twists and turns of fate and politics? What will happen next, if the Council is dismantled? Will we be affected in some way?*

*There are other strange rumours dancing about too. Some mention having seen a team of pegasi flying into town and there are voices that say that one of them was carrying a mysterious device that glowed with an eerie light. We haven’t seen pegasi since... well, most of us had never seen a single pegasus, so you can imagine how odd this looks. Who are these strange beings, and what are their intentions towards New Pegasus? Does the City Board have any knowledge of their existence, or have our governors welcomed them into our community?*

*Also, we have been hearing stories lately about Farsight, the head of the Council, having been seen wandering the streets wounded and dressed in rags, as if he had escaped from the dungeon of a maniac. I know this sounds unbelievable, but many witnesses say they saw him walking down the Strip at midnight. Some even say that he was apprehended by a member of the NPPD and driven into custody, but that just makes the story harder to believe. Naturally, this station will do the utmost to find out the truth behind all these rumours.*

*Now, moving on to the state of the ongoing conflict between the forces of the New Equestrian Republic and the Tsardom. Believe me when I say that the resistance of the NER forces in the East Bank is becoming heroic! The last report aired by the Republican Army states that the remaining Rangers were able to repel an attack in terms of five to one inferiority. Five to one, mares and gentlecolts! We have to be thankful for letting us live another day without the threat of the ruthless barbarians of the Tsar coming to pillage our homes, but the truth is that things are starting to look grim for the interests of the twin unicorns. Their best troops, their Elite Rangers, are being slaughtered en masse by the forces of the Tsar, which, even if less prepared, keep pushing forth with the intensity of a tidal wave, threatening to break through the NER lines; and if that were to happen, those troops guarding the West Bank wouldn’t be prepared to handle what is coming to them. With all due respect to the honorable soldiers of the Republic, they’d better mobilize all their might to contain the Tsar’s attack, or we might be overrun very soon. I’m no expert tactician, but I’m just calling out to whoever is responsible.*

*Anyway, that was all for this hour in the news, let’s return to some music, shall we? In times as dire as these, we need powerful tunes to boost our morale and get us ready to do our jobs, and I have exactly what we require. Get ready to move your body to the beat of Vinyl Scratch, mares and gentlecolts. There is nothing better out there to start the day with energy and high spirits! Enjoy the music and remember that we’ll be back in an hour; and don’t forget that you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and that I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly to your hearts!”*

History seemed to run in circles. Eight years later, I was sitting in the same dull grey cell that I had been

thrown into the day I was banished from Stable 188. The same concrete walls who could use a layer of colored paint, the same concrete floor that could use some tiles, the same concrete ceiling that could use... well, nothing really, since it was a ceiling after all. The place hadn't changed a tiny bit, apart from the occasional writing on the wall, done by a bored prisoner who had nothing to lose. I had been sitting there for some hours, but I didn't feel like wasting my time noting that I had been there. It's not like anypony would care about it anyway.

Besides, there were other matters that kept my mind occupied while I sat on the cold concrete floor, namely, the cowardly accusation of the City Council. Treason? How dared they speak of treason? In which way had I betrayed my companions? I doubted they could be called friends anymore, after what they had done to me. A true friend doesn't stab you in the back like that. I guess that my younger self would have expected such a maneuver, as each one of us worked for our own interests, and we owed little loyalties to each other. However, eight years of prosperity and good manners had made me believe that the rest of the City Council had finally bowed down to me.

I was wrong, although I didn't understand what had driven the Council to label me as a traitor and a conspirator. Could it have been because of Avro? It's true that I incurred many risks because of that lovable liar, but the City had overcome the situation without suffering any damage or casualty. I would have expected a cold welcome, a session of chastising delivered by Rose and Dee, but I would never have imagined ending imprisoned by those who I had helped into the lead. Even if they had perfect reasons to lock me up, I would have been a bit less rash, for old times' sake.

I felt really bitter and angry at all of those who I had mistakenly called friends. Those ponies who, for eight long years, had been standing beside me, each and every one of them cooperating with me in the task of making New Pegasus a better place. Despite having all that behind us, at the first sign of trouble they turned my backs on me and left me to rot in the darkness of a prison cell. It was outrageous! I fumed at the thought of Dee, Ampera and Saddle deciding to take me out of the picture, because I simply couldn't believe that Rose had supported that decision.

Or had she? Something in the very deep of me remembered her irate reaction to my decision of helping Avro in her fight against the Communists. Could that have sparked a will of vengeance in her? I should have taken her words into account. I should definitely have listened to her... she had always been my voice of reason, my guiding light, and I had left her aside because of some beautiful flank. How stupid had I been! I felt the tears flood my eyes and I lowered my head in bitterness. Even my dearest friends, those who had been with me for all my life, were leaving me aside.

"Farsight?" A voice spoke. "Is that you?"

I looked up to see Brass Badge looking at me from the other side of the bars that kept me locked from freedom. He seemed worried and tired, and he was taking sips from a smoking cup of coffee. An old pony never leaves his habits, I guessed.

"Yes, it's me, Badge." I sighed. "Broken, battered and almost dead, but it's me. Oh, yes, and did I mention that I have been turned into a pariah?"

"Boy, you don't look good." Badge mumbled and sat beside the cell door. "What happened to you?"

"After all the business with the pegasi, I crashed an airship in Tsardom territory."

"You did what?" Badge blinked in disbelief.

"I know it sounds hard to believe, but that's what happened." I groaned. "I got out of the Red base in an airship, like the one Avro and Nadyr used to get back. However, somepony attacked me from the ground and I was forced to crash-land the damned machine in Lake Honeymead. However, I couldn't stop it soon enough and I ended up on the other side, in the territory of the Tsar. One of the patrols found me stumbling around and captured me."

"Sweet Celestia." Badge gasped. "And how did you manage to get out of there?"

"It wasn't easy." I laughed in dismay. "I had to endure torture, I had to fight for my life in a barbaric Arena,

killing three NER troopers in the process, and I was taken to see the commander of the Tsar's army, who happened to be none other than Delvio Ferratura!"

"Delvio Ferratura? Are you serious?"

"Does it look like I'm lying, Badge?" I grumbled. "It was him... and it's because it was him that I am here now."

"I can't believe he let you go, after all you made him suffer."

"Well, that's his wretched plan of vengeance." I shrugged. "He told me that he would destroy all what I had achieved, that he would kill everypony I cared about, and once that was done, he would kill me himself. Still, he wanted me to experience what he felt, the futility of trying to defend myself from his unstoppable attack."

"That's horrible."

"Yes, but that's a mistake. He's given me a chance." I grinned. "Although I have been stabbed on the back one more time. I think the Council is doing Delvio's dirty work for him."

Brass Badge smiled sadly. He and I had many things in common, beginning from our origins, and I think he showed a special empathy towards me. My current situation had to be a tough spot for him, there was no doubt about it.

"I don't understand this move either." He shook his head.

"You won't happen to know how or why I have been accused of conspiring against the Council, will you?"

"Sadly, no." His face showed regret. "I have been relieved of my duty. The Council hasn't got the guts to say that I'm fired, that's why they try to compensate by giving me a meager pay and letting me walk around the station as if I was retired. Standoff is the one managing the Department right now..."

"And I assume he's acting like a stupid foal." I replied.

"Right on the spot, my friend. You keep being as observant as always." Badge smirked. "As you can see, every pony who has shown any kind of sympathy towards you is slowly being moved away from the positions of power. The Council wants to leave you without any ties, it wants to sever all your connections to influence and image."

"They are afraid of me."

"Exactly." Badge nodded. "I don't have a clue why, but their behaviour shows that they fear what you might do to them."

"I... I don't know, Badge." I sighed. "They were my friends... we've been through so much together that it's hard to believe that they would do something so vile."

"Friends are an illusion in the Wasteland, Farsight." Badge grunted. "I thought like you until I got expelled from the Corps. As soon as Standoff took the lead, all the agents who had been my friends and colleagues wouldn't even give me the time of day. I'm starting to think there is no such thing as friendship in a world as unforgiving as this."

"You know what hurts me the most, Badge?" I asked bitterly.

"What is it?"

"Rose." I bit my lip not to start crying. "I saved her from the Wasteland, you know? She was about to be raped by three raiders, and I put my life on the line to take her out of the situation. I raised her as if she had been my daughter or my younger sister, and look at her now. She's the spokesperson for the Council, and she's turned her back on me, just like the rest."

Badge shook his head and looked to the floor. I swear I saw tears rolling from his eyes.

"This world is a horrible place, Farsight. No matter how hard we work to make it worth living, our lives are bound to be miserable and disgraceful. I never thought Rose would betray you, to be honest. I could see Dee Cleff or Ampera sidestepping you in their way to power, but Rose? No, that wasn't even in my wildest

fantasies.”

“I agree with you, Badge. Eight years of hard work and dutiful service, and look at me. I’m sitting in a prison cell, waiting to be executed, or banished, or whatever they choose to do with my sorry hide.”

“There should be a trial.” Badge frowned.

“I admire your idealism, Badge.” I grinned. “However, this is a political issue. No law would consider me guilty. The Council wants me out, and this solution is more elegant than shooting me dead in a gutter.”

“That’s just despicable, but I guess you’re right. Experience has taught me to trust your judgment, Farsight. Anyway, is there something I can do for you?”

“I’m afraid there isn’t, Badge.” I shrugged. “You can’t get me out of this cell and clean my name, so there’s little you can do to help me. Still, I thank you for being there. You’re a good pony, Badge, a very good one. Don’t let anypony convince you of anything else.”

“Thank you, Farsight.” Badge let go a subtle laugh. “You’re a good pony too, even if you don’t regard yourself as such.”

“Now it’s my turn to thank you, Badge.” I nodded and smiled sadly. “Now get going. Don’t waste your time talking to this loose end.”

“Goodbye, Farsight.”

“Goodbye, Badge.”

The former police officer turned around and left me alone in my cell, once again. What the Council was doing to all the ponies who had been somehow connected to me was simply repulsive, as they had little to do with my choices and my past mistakes. Badge couldn’t be held responsible of whatever action of mine that could be considered a betrayal to the City, but if he had been ostracized, others would have been as well. I began to worry about Nadyr, Avro and even Rose, as they were the closest ponies I had in New Pegasus. Maybe Rose had been set apart as well, and that would imply that she had had nothing to do with the accusation. I really needed to know if that was the case.

I needed to know, because I wanted it to be like that. If Rose had been separated from the Council, that would mean that she didn’t support the idea of accusing me of treason. It meant a great difference to me, as her support and her presence beside me was one of the very little things I could count on to get me through the bad times. Knowing for certain that she still trusted me would be a true morale boost to face whatever was coming to me.

“Oi, Farsight!” Standoff walked into the cell block roaring at the top of his voice.

“I’m awake, dickwad.” I groaned. “No need to make me deaf.”

“Who are you calling dickwad?” He fumed.

“You, because that’s what you are.” I frowned. “What the fuck do you want?”

“It’s time for your trial!” He roared.

Oh, so there WAS going to be a trial. Probably, it would be nothing more than a stupid masquerade, a mock act of justice to have me shot at the break of dawn, or something of the kind. However, it was fairly surprising for the Council to bother in making such a show, when the outcome of it was clearly decided before hoof. I shrugged and got back on my hooves as Standoff opened the barred gate and waited for me to come out.

“Wait, don’t I have the chance to tidy myself up?” I asked.

“What do you want to tidy up for?” He laughed coarsely.

“It’s a fucking trial, for Celestia’s sake!” I stomped the floor in anger. “At least, let me dress up properly!”

“My orders were to get you to the trial immediately, so there’s no time to change clothes. Get moving!”

“One of these days, Standoff, I’m going to make you regret what you’ve done to me.” I mumbled.

“I’d like to see you try.” He replied smugly. “Now march!”

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I was driven through the Strip, under the looks of every single pony that walked past us, towards the Council Hall. Having me dragged to my trial, without having been able to put on a decent suit, was something despicable and vile, but I realized that it was all part of one same strategy. They wanted to have me discredited, disgraced. They intended to put the common pony against me, so that when they decided to get rid of me, nopony would raise his or her voice in my defence. By turning me into the evil pony who sold New Pegasus to Celestia knows who, they would avoid a popular revolt when the time of dealing with me came. My bitterness grew more and more as I heard the population whisper, seeing how low I had gotten after having been so high.

“Look at him!” A stallion mumbled. “He looks like a beggar...”

“What has he done to be like that?” A mare hissed.

“Is he really Farsight?”

“Yes, look at his Cutie Mark!”

“It can’t be! He’s wounded and dirty! Farsight would never walk around like that!”

“I tell you it’s him. Look in his eyes!”

“Oh my goodness, it’s him alright! Do you think that he really betrayed the Council?”

“He was too smart to be trusted... Those ponies always want to prove they’re better than the rest.”

“But what about all the good things he’s done over the years?”

“That is true, but I am sure that there are a lot of things we don’t know. You know, dark things.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Trust me, the higher they get, the more devious they become.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know it, period.”

I sighed and kept on walking. They had their reasons to mistrust us, after all. We had been so deeply entwined in our own politics and plans, that we had lost contact with the everyday pony. When things were good, nopony would bicker, but once the world began to crumble beneath our hooves, the whole population would be out for blood. I could expect no sudden benefactor rising from the shadows in this one. My game was definitely over.

Standoff pushed me into the Council Hall Building, shooing the ponies in the street with a wave of his baton. The trial would take place without audience, with doors and windows closed and with no recording devices enabled. My suspicions were confirmed when I heard that. They didn’t want anypony to know what was going to be said in the Hall, apart from the official statement of the Spokespony. Would Rose be the one delivering the news to the townsfolk?

I walked into the very Hall where I had dictated the fate of New Pegasus in so many occasions. In this one, however, I would be shackled and at the rest of the Council’s mercy. Frankly, I didn’t know what I would be facing, or who would be the one I would have to speak to, nor did I care. I knew enough about Wasteland politics to understand that it was no fair trial, and that the decision was already taken. The only thing I could expect to do was to leave the room with my head high, having proven that all their accusations were plain junk.

I found myself staring at four ponies, whose faces denoted their will to bring me down at all costs, and who I had called friends before. Friends that had stabbed me in the back and were about to rip me apart, figuratively speaking. Dee stood in the middle, looking solemn and cold, dressed in one of her signature white suits that

made her look imposing and enthralling at the same time. She gazed upon me with a mixture of feelings, despise and respect in equal terms, as if this situation was something that she didn't want but she had to do for a greater good. Such behavior was typical in her.

Beside her, Ampera looked at me with a face of utter disappointment. Somehow, I had the feeling that she had grown to appreciate me over the years, but her Ranger backdrop didn't seem to have handled too well that I welcomed the pegasi into the city. My gut told me that she was behind all the scheming, as she believed that I was going to undermine them and substitute them for a new order. Saddle sat close to the former Ranger, looking at me with a grin of smug satisfaction in his face. He had never grown to fully like me, that was for sure, and now he couldn't help feeling good while seeing me toil. I still knew he was nothing more than a mere puppet in Ampera's hooves, but he was dangerous when left free.

The last pony almost hid in the corner, as if she didn't really want to be there, while looking at me with a neutral expression. Rose didn't break eye contact with me, even if she was clearly making an effort to stay hidden from my gaze. There was something odd about her manners, as if she was concealing her true intentions. Could it be that she was acting according to a hidden agenda? My eyebrows went up by instinct, and she replied with a brief but clear wink that lifted my spirits. Not all was lost.

"Finally, you're back, Farsight." Dee began talking calmly, as it was common in her.

"You don't seem too pleased to see me." I replied.

"It's not about how I feel, Farsight." Dee shook her head. "Personally, I'm glad to see you back in one piece, and as ironic and cutting as ever. However, we need to discuss... other matters."

"Like those who have had me locked in jail for the night?" I shook my head. "I haven't even had the chance to dress properly!"

"I know that, but it was a priority to have this issue solved as soon as possible."

"Spare the excuses, Dee." I groaned. "You wanted to drag me through the streets, looking like a bloody hobo, so that everypony witnessed my downfall."

"That is absurd." She replied, while Ampera nodded. "The whole city is in your debt for eight years of dutiful service. We are in your debt for that."

"Then why all this charade, Dee?" I roared. "Why do you flag me as a traitor and a conspirator, if I have been of great value to New Pegasus?"

"Farsight, you don't get it, do you?" Ampera intervened. "Your actions, your careless behaviour, has put the City in jeopardy."

"I wouldn't consider that a treason. It's more a matter of bad management than anything else."

"I have to agree with Farsight on that." Rose nodded coldly. "Let's not forget that we base our decisions in the limited data we have. Sometimes, we're bound to make mistakes."

"This is not a mistake, Rose." Ampera shook her head. "It could have been averted by leaving Avro aside."

"Could it, Ampera?" Rose replied. "We never knew of Ilyushin's true intentions. Did he really just want to recapture Avro or was he using her as a casus belli against us?"

"The simplest explanation tends to be the most probable one, Rose."

"Really... then do tell me, Ampera. How many times in History has a prisoner been demanded under the threat of an all-out war? It's not very diplomatic, to be honest."

"Pre-War diplomacy doesn't apply in the Wasteland." Ampera groaned. "You should already know that, Rose."

"Let's not get sidetracked here, please." Dee said coldly. "We're judging the decision itself, not the factors that motivated it."

"Exactly." Saddle groaned. "After all, the main factor was that you were completely dumbstruck by that

pegasus mare.”

“So what?” I replied grinning. “Something similar happened to you with Golden Swallow, don’t you remember? We’re stallions, Saddle, and that goes in our nature. You can’t blame me for being in love, the same way that I don’t blame you for having followed the lead of that misguided psycho Goldie.”

“Whoa, whoa, don’t try to talk smart to me, Farsight.” Saddle hissed.

“Saddle, please, keep your manners.” Ampera warned her husband. “This is a trial, let’s not forget about it.”

“Ampera, while I can understand that going against the pegasi was a bad decision, I still don’t see where the accusation of treason comes from. I swear that I have been regretting the choice of following Avro for a long time, but the way I see it, there have been no notorious consequences for the good of the Council and the City. The Red Front has been defeated, some of their top scientists and engineers have joined our banner, and we’re still in good terms with the Republic.”

“Those pegasi have sworn loyalty to you, Farsight, not to the City of New Pegasus.” Dee shook her head.

“We can’t trust them.”

“Is that the problem?” I replied. “I will have them bow down to you in a minute.”

“No, that’s not it.” Ampera grumbled. “We don’t trust pegasi. We never have, and we never will. They’re cowards and turncoats, and by the time we notice they’ll be leaving us behind.”

“Is that what worries you, Ampera Von Ohm?” I spat. “Your bigotry amazes me. You call me a traitor because I put my trust in ponies who have sworn allegiance to me, like I did with you? I would understand a warning, but then again, I can hardly see how this comes to qualify as treason.”

“You’re constantly putting your interests before those of the City, Farsight.” Ampera frowned. “Your recklessness is a problem for the well-being of the population, and we plan to stop it before it costs us much.”

“Recklessness, eh? So, it’s not treason, but fear?” I smiled. “I finally realize what is going on. You’re not judging me for something I’ve done. You are afraid of what I am becoming, and you’re feeling scared about your future; and instead of letting me know and talking it out like civilized ponies, you say I’m a traitor and lock me up. Frankly, I am very disappointed.”

“Don’t talk such rot, Farsight!” Dee exclaimed. “I agree with Ampera. You’re becoming a stray bullet, acting without thinking things properly and moved by your own selfish interests. One of these days, you’d bring destruction to this city.”

“Destruction?” I blinked. Dee wasn’t prone to go all dramatic on things.

“Yes, destruction. Can’t you see how difficult our current situation is? We’re caught in the middle of a storm, with the NER on one side and the Tsardom on the other! Whatever happens in that war will determine our coming fate!”

“Do you really think I’m blind, Dee? I know what the odds are!” I pointed at my wounds. “See this? I escaped out of the Tsar’s camp on the other side before I got here! I was tortured and had to fight to survive, dammit! Don’t go telling me about the complications of the war, because I have seen both sides, and I really doubt that you have!”

Dee recoiled a bit due to my retort, but Ampera took her place.

“Don’t play victim on us, Farsight!” She yelled. “We know about the pegasus device you moved into town, I checked it personally. Did you believe that I would let that pass? It’s a Celestia-damned balefire bomb! It would destroy the entire City and it would take out the entire population in one fell swoop!”

“There are engineers who know how to handle that thing. It would free us from our dependency on Hooper Dam.”

“I don’t trust those engineers.”

“So we come to that again!” I spat. “You and your pathologic mistrust of pegasi!”

“The same could be said of your stubborn defence of their race.” Saddle replied. “Is that your head speaking, or is it your dick?”

“Saddle!” Dee roared.

“Don’t tell me to shut up, Dee! I know why he’s being so reckless and dangerous. We all do! It’s that mare that fell from the skies who has him entranced, and who’s telling him what to do every time.”

“Saddle, you’re absolutely wrong there.” I shook my head. “She used me, but the last choices I made, like the one of the Enola device, were entirely mine.”

“Still, you have endangered us by doing so.” Dee replied.

“Is that all?” I grinned. “Because I see no reason to call me a traitor, mares and gentlecolts. I can accept the fact that many of my last choices were wrong or misguided, and I can also understand that you don’t trust the recently arrived pegasi. However, the most I would deserve for having done that is a little time away from office, or a fine. There are no more present dangers, if I’m not mistaken, as the pegasus threat has been dealt with. About the Enola device, I welcome you to work with engineer Petlyakov to develop a valid solution for New Pegasus.”

“You see, Farsight, it’s not as simple as that.” Ampera shook her head.

“The New Equestrian Republic contacted us yesterday, letting us know that we had attacked their allies and that they were going to consider that a declaration of war.” Dee mumbled.

“What?” I gasped. Littlepip’s words echoed in my head.

“Apparently, the Red Front had some sort of hidden treaty with the Republic.” Saddle grunted.

“That’s why they refused to help us.” Rose shrugged. “They could have let us know that we were messing with them, but somehow they didn’t want us to know that either.”

“We can’t fight a war on two fronts, Farsight.” Dee said solemnly. “We were counting on the NER to be our shield against the incoming forces of the Tsar, but now they are threatening to occupy the city.”

“We can’t let that happen.” Ampera frowned.

“That’s why we tried to reach a diplomatic solution.” Dee nodded. “They wouldn’t negotiate, but in the end we managed to get an ultimatum from them. They wanted you, Farsight, as you were the one that single-hoovedly had taken out their winged allies. We promised them that you would be extradited in exchange for defence and protection against the Tsar.”

“How dare you?” I roared. “You owe it ALL to me! Without me, you would still be fighting each other over a piece of dirty soil in Freedom Field! No fancy houses, no bulky wallets, nothing more than misery and hunger! I picked you out of the gutter! I elevated you from mere gang leaders to respected politicians! Without me, you would be NOTHING!”

“We know.” Saddle shook his head. “But with you, we’re doomed, and frankly, I prefer to be alive. I’ll deal with my remorse over a bottle of whiskey.”

“You are nothing more than a bunch of cowards.” I fumed. “I shouldn’t have trusted you in the first place.”

“If this counts for something, Farsight, I am sorry that it had to come to this.” Dee mumbled. “Had we known what was to come, we would have thought better. However, we can’t change the past, so we must prepare for our future. Standoff, take him away. We have to coordinate the extradition with the NER.”

The police pony, who had been standing silently in the corner of the room, walked beside me and dragged me out of the Council Hall, while I glared at my former friends in endless hate. I would have payback, I swore to Celestia.

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I sat on the hard, gray and cold concrete floor of the NPPD cell for another two hours, according to my PipBuck timer, without anything else to do than to juggle the things that I had been through in my mind.

Bitterness was a massive weight that crushed my morale down, and anger bubbled in me. I had been betrayed by every single pony I had trusted, with the possible exception of good old Nadyr, but I didn't know what had been of him, so as far as I was concerned, he could have turned his back on me too.

I felt vexed and jaded, having become nothing more than an object of trade with the NER. Praline wanted my head, that was for certain, as I had sabotaged something that only resided within her tortuous mind, and that she would only share with Harpsong and maybe with Stonetree. I could understand how Littlepip felt up in her tower, her name being used to justify each and every desire of the lunatic president of the Republic; no matter how much it clashed with all the Light Bringer had been fighting for. In the end, I had suffered her same fate. The ones that I trusted to be my friends had dumped me, as I was to serve a greater purpose: I was the response to the NER's blackmailing campaign.

I could expect that from Dee or Ampera. After all, the first more than the second were expert politicians, and had been playing the game even before I appeared in their lives. No matter whether they were leading a gang or managing a city, they knew that sacrifices had to be made in order to achieve something that was above in the level of priorities. I would have done the same, had I been in their position; although I expected some more loyalty from them. I had, indeed, been the reason of their prosperity. It was me who had incurred the risks of getting everything together, and it had cost me the life of a beloved one. In the end, I had succeeded, and they had profited from that success... but memory tends to be short-lived in New Pegasus. Now that a greater threat loomed about, I had to be discarded to ensure the continuity of their rule. If only I had the chance of breaking out...

However, what hurt me the most was seeing Rose among the Council. She had acted in a rather quirky way during the trial, as if she was just playing a role... but I wasn't convinced. As much as I'd love to, I couldn't just rush to claim she was innocent. Rose had been in the Council all the time that I was away, and she hadn't done anything to stop Dee and the others accusing me of treason and wanting to sell me to the Republic. At least, she hadn't been able to achieve anything. Once again, I was torn between my rage and my naïve will to forgive her, as it had happened with Avro. Speaking of which, I hadn't heard about her... what had the Council done with the pegasus?

"Farsight..." While I was deep in my thoughts, somepony walked into the cell without me noticing.

"Rose?" When I lifted my head, I found the young mare looking at me with a sad face.

"Sweet Celestia, you look terrible. Let me heal those wounds for you." Rose sat beside me and her magic began working on the cuts and gashes I had suffered in the Tsar's camp.

"Thank you..." I sighed, while I felt my body respond to her treatment. "What brings you here, Rose? Are you going to kiss me goodbye?"

"Shut up and relax." She groaned. For ten minutes, we sat in silence while she worked her wonders in my damaged body. "You'll have to wear those scars, but you'll be fine."

"Rose, I need to know... why are you here?"

Rose sighed and smiled.

"Farsight, we need to talk. Things have gone awfully wrong lately, and I haven't been able to do anything about it. I tried to speak for you, but the rest of the Council wouldn't..."

"You did that?" I gasped. "I thought that you were mad at me."

"I was, in the beginning." Rose nodded. "But if I have to tell you the truth, Farsight, it wasn't because of the plan of taking on the pegasi. Not to a hundred percent, really."

"Then what was it?"

"I was jealous." Rose blushed.

"Jealous? Because of..."

"Because of Avro, yes." Rose blushed harder and giggled. Despite all she had been through, she was just an

old filly. “When she crashed into town... well, let’s say that I had been regarding you as something more than a friend, and suddenly, you could see nothing more than what she told you to see.”

“Really?” I laughed softly, but couldn’t think of a comeback. Rose’s confession was... unexpected.

“Yes, really.” Rose smiled in embarrassment. “I had a crush on you, Farsight, although I never dared to tell you.”

“Now you don’t, I guess.”

“I still love you, if that’s what you’re asking.” She smiled. “However, I’ve realized that you are not the best match for me. You’re much older, and I can understand that you might be looking for... other kinds of mares. Anyway, you will always have a place in my heart.”

“You will have one in mine too.” I kissed her softly in the lips, making her shiver. It was an innocent kiss, nothing more than a token of gratitude.

“Please don’t do that...” She squeed. “Or I might change my mind again!”

We both laughed. Despite the hardship of the situation, Rose managed to make me forget about my worries.

“Fine, fine. No more kisses for you.” I smiled, but then I changed the tone. “There is one more thing I need to tell you, Rose.”

“What is it, Farsight?”

“Rose...” I felt the tears flood my eyes as my lips struggled to speak clearly. “I’m sorry... I am so sorry for not having listened to you... You were right all along, and if I had paid you enough attention I wouldn’t find myself in this situation. Rose, I have failed... I am nothing more than a big failure.”

“What?” Rose winced. “No, no, no! You’re not a failure, Farsight! No pony knew what ties the Republic had with the Reds!”

“Anyway, I shouldn’t have... I shouldn’t have followed Avro so blindly. I used to be much more cautious... and I let myself go. Now it’s all over.”

“Over? Who says it’s over?” Rose frowned.

“I do! It’s either me or the City, and why? Just because I wanted to take a mare to bed, that’s all! I have condemned New Pegasus to destruction! I have failed you all!”

I looked at the floor and let the tears fall freely. Rose grabbed my head and forced me to look at her eyes, where tears had begun to roll as well.

“Listen to me, Farsight. You haven’t failed anypony. All of the population of this city owes you something, you are the leader that unified them! You brought peace and prosperity, and no pony can take that from you! They are proud of you... I am proud of you. We need you to stand up to the challenge once again, because there will be none other more prepared than you to face the odds.”

“Re-really?” I mumbled. “You really think that?”

“I do, Farsight. I tried to stop the decision of the Council with all my might, but there was little I could do about it. Saddle threatened to have me imprisoned as well, so I decided to shut up and see where things went. It was a moment of weakness, but I can make up for it.”

“How?”

“I’m getting you out of jail.” Rose winked.

“What about Standoff? Won’t he stop you?”

“Standoff is a weakling.” She grinned. “I’m still a member of the Council and he won’t dare to lay a hoof on me. If he does, well, we’ll deal with him.”

“That’s reassuring.” I smiled.

“Besides, Farsight, no matter what the Council has said, you have got a lot of friends in New Pegasus that will back you up as soon as you step out of the building. There’s Badge, Tracker, that funny pegasus engineer whose name I don’t dare to pronounce...”

“Petlyakov?”

“That one.” Rose nodded. “Pet-lee-ah-cove?”

“That’ll do.” I grinned. “Call him Pet.”

“Yes, Pet. He’s a witty fellow, always with a snarky response here and there. Besides, he looks nice.” Rose blushed again. “I think he really appreciates you, and he told me to count him in for anything required.”

“I see... Well, it’s good to have so much support, considering that things will get ugly as soon as I set hoof in the street.”

“You’re going to have revenge, right?” Rose asked.

“Don’t go telling me that you don’t approve...”

“They deserve some punishment, Farsight.” Rose frowned, and I caught a trace of Lavender’s old personality. “Some of us never forgot who we were loyal to.”

“Anyway, as soon as the word spreads, we’re going to be in trouble.” I shrugged. “I’m sure that they’ll send the roboponies against me.”

“I told Pet to deal with that matter.” Rose smiled cunningly. “He has overridden the robopony control scheme. It will only respond to your PipBuck jacked into any of the terminals in town.”

“My, my, Rose, where would I be without you?”

“En route to an NER camp?”

“Ouch.”

“Sorry.” Rose grinned. “I just couldn’t leave that unanswered.”

“Hahaha, you’re as smart as always, Rose.” I hugged her. “What about Avro, though?”

“Still missing her?”

“Not really.” I frowned. “She used me, Rose. She had me dancing to her tune, assuming risks I would never had assumed otherwise, just to get to a position of power. I don’t know if she loves me or not, but I can’t just walk away and leave her behind.”

“Farsight...” Rose mumbled. “We decided to lock Avro up in the Spire, since she had nowhere else to go. She’s not a prisoner, really, but the Council didn’t want to have her messing around, considering her ties to you. She seemed very worried about something when she arrived here, though.”

“We had a terrible row in the pegasus base.”

“It’s not only that.” Rose shook her head. “My gut tells me she’s deeply hurt by something. It looked like remorse, actually.”

“I don’t believe Avro to be the remorseful kind, Rose.”

“Don’t judge her too rashly, Farsight.” Rose looked at me in the eyes. “There is something that she’s hiding from all of us, and that makes her feel bad... Give her a chance to open her heart to you.”

I blinked in surprise. From all the ponies in the world, Rose was the last one I would have expected to ask for understanding towards Avro. I would have to take that into account, considering who was the one demanding it.

“I see... Well, I will give her a second chance.” I shrugged. “Since you asked for it.”

“Thank you, Farsight.” Rose smiled. “I know you are not merciless.”

“I don’t think my issue with Avro is a matter of mercy... anyway, where’s Nadyr?”

“He’s laying low right now.” Rose mumbled. “Despite being Dee’s husband and the father to her foals, Saddle and Ampera wanted to charge him with some of the responsibility. That’s why Dee and I decided to have him ‘arrested’ at home, while things got sorted out.”

“Dee seemed a little worried during the trial, didn’t she?” I asked.

“I knew you’d notice it.” Rose nodded. “Dee is torn between two loyalties... once again. On the one hoof, she keeps regarding you as the leader, as the one meant to guide the fate of the city. On the other, the rest of the Council members have been reminding her that the NER will show no mercy when they occupy New Pegasus. That’s why she’s decided to fold to their demands, even if she was hurt by them.”

“Are you asking for forgiveness?” I raised an eyebrow.

“No, I’m not. That’s yours to decide.” Rose shook her head. “However, don’t let revenge cloud your mind. You might do things you will regret later.”

“Your point is clear, Rose.” I replied.

“I guess you’ll want to get moving, right?” Rose asked.

“The sooner we get this sorted out, the sooner we can focus on tackling the problems with the Republic and the Tsar.”

I got back on my hooves, feeling relieved both by Rose’s magic and by her support. She was one true friend, a pony in which I would be able to trust until the very day I died. I felt bad for having doubted her loyalty and resolve, for having thought she had turned her back on me; but at the same time I felt good for knowing she was there for me, and that she would back me up in any endeavour I took on.

We walked out of the cell and into the main lobby of the Police Station, where Standoff was snoozing behind the counter. As soon as he heard hoofsteps, he snapped out of his nap and began babbling.

“Do you need anything else ma’am... WHAT THE HELL?”

“Standoff, I’m setting him free.” Rose said coldly.

“What? I can’t do that, ma’am. Council’s orders.”

“But I am part of the Council, right?”

“Y-yes ma’am, but I can’t let Farsight walk out without the permission of the rest of the members.”

“You will do that.” Rose growled. “Or I will have you cleaning the streets.”

“N-no can do, ma’am.”

“Allow me, Rose.” I took a step forward. “I’ll deal with this rogue individual.”

“Watch what you’re doing, Farsight...”

Standoff readied himself, but before he could do anything, I spun and bucked him with all the strength of my metal hooves. He flew back and hit the wall, falling to the floor like a rag doll. I checked his breath to see that I hadn’t killed the poor sod and returned to Rose.

“I had been willing to do that for a loooooong time.” I smiled.

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After having knocked Standoff out, I walked into the NPPD warehouse and fitted myself with a bulletproof vest and a short pistol, ready to jump into rough situations. Small guns such as the nine millimeter cannon I had borrowed from the Department armory were not the kind of material I liked to work with, but my trusted rifle was now in the hooves of some Tsardom soldier or officer. I knew there was no way of getting it back, so I would have to work with what I had at hoof. Still, that was definitely not going to deter me.

We walked out of the Police Station, trying to blend in with the population as much as we could, although we

knew that it was almost impossible to pull off. Rose and I were known ponies among the citizens of New Pegasus, which meant that our presence turned many heads as we advanced through the Strip. I realized that Saddle, Ampera and Dee would soon be aware of my jailbreak, and that they would send ponies to stop us in the blink of an eye. Time was of the essence.

“Where should we head first?” Rose asked.

“Frankly, Rose, I don’t care.” I shook my head. “Right now, my only worry is to get payback.”

“I know, Farsight, but don’t lose your mind yet.” Rose warned. “We might be facing heavy resistance.”

“How heavy, Rose?” I mumbled. “Do we know how many ponies remain loyal to the Council?”

“Not too many, but I know that there are individuals that have sworn to protect Saddle, Ampera and Dee, probably because of their past as gang goons.”

“It is logical.” I nodded. “After all, some ponies have been serving them their entire lives.”

“Anyway, let’s be careful, OK?” Rose mumbled. “Should I call Pet?”

“For what?”

“He could send us some backup... roboponies, for example.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I want this to be personal. It’s an issue between me and them, and I don’t want the entire city to burn because of our quarrels.”

“How thoughtful of you, Farsight.” Rose grinned in irony.

“There’s a perfectly good reason for that, Rose. I don’t want the forces outside of town to know that we’re having a bit of a breakdown.” I growled. “I think the NER is about to jump on us, and frankly, I prefer them not to be aware of our discord.”

“I understand that.” Rose nodded. “We should keep things silent, then.”

“As silent as possible.” I shrugged. “I know that some things will filter to the press, but the less the radio knows, the better things will go in the future.”

“The population will find out, Farsight.”

“As long as they do it once everything is settled, I don’t mind. It’s just a matter of time.”

“I see. Anyway, where to now?”

“I think I’ll go pay old Saddle a visit. He’s the most violent one, and if he finds out that I’m enacting my revenge upon them, he’ll come out guns blazing. We need to surprise him.”

“Fair enough.” Rose smiled. “Let’s go, then.”

We doubled our pace as we advanced towards the Diamonds. Saddle had refused to move into old New Pegasus, and had preferred to maintain his venue in Freedom Field, although he had done some notable improvements to it. I felt Ampera’s guiding hoof behind all the layers of paint and wallpaper that had been applied to the formerly murky Casino, which now gleamed like an off-Strip jewel who preyed on locals more than on traders or tourists. We were frankly surprised when we found no guards standing at the gates. It seemed as if Saddle wasn’t inside, or didn’t care about us coming.

When we entered the Casino, we found ourselves in the old restaurant hall, now cleaned and repaired, but there was no pony to be seen... except for an ageing stallion in a black suit and an Appleloosan hat, who leaned against the counter with a bottle of whiskey, just as he had said. He smiled when he saw us walk in, just as if he had been waiting for me to arrive.

“Farsight!” Saddle groaned. He wasn’t fully wasted, but he was drunk. “I knew you’d come.”

“Watch out, Farsight...” Rose whispered. “It could be a trap.”

We both advanced cautiously towards Saddle, who took another gulp of the bottle and smiled distractedly. He

looked desperate, as if he had realized his fate.

“Come on, you two! I am not hiding anything from you.”

“You look... bad, Saddle.” I mumbled.

“Yes, that’s because I feel terrible.” Saddle moaned. “I have fired every single guard that remained here... I knew you would return, wanting revenge. Because that’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Saddle, it is.” I groaned. “Although I can’t help feeling a little bit of compassion towards you now, seeing you in such a calamitous state.”

“Don’t.” Saddle blabbered. “I don’t deserve compassion.”

“Why?” Rose asked, looking sad.

“B-because I am a t-total sellout. I bowed down to Goldie, I bow down to Ampera... and now, I’ve s-sold myself to the Republic!” Saddle stuttered and took another gulp of whiskey. “I-I-I knew that R-Rose would...”

“Release me?” I blinked. “How?”

“C-can’t you see it, Farsight? S-she’s pure, untainted by corruption and greed. Not like you and I. As soon as we sent you to jail, I realized that she would free you and that you would come asking for revenge.”

“How wise of you, Saddle.” I snickered.

“W-wise, me?” Saddle laughed, making a bubbling sound. “I’m definitely not wise! I’m a loser, a wannabe leader who gravitated around more capable ones to ensure his position. Y-you were right, Farsight. We’re nothing without you. Maybe Ampera hasn’t noticed yet, but she would still be a d-disgruntled g-gun seller if you hadn’t appeared.”

“Too bad you realized that so late, Saddle.” I frowned. “You could have done something to stop them.”

“A-as soon as the R-Republic gave us the ultimatum... A-Ampera had already decided what to do with you. I c-couldn’t stop her.”

“Wrong, wrong, wrong, Saddle!” I stomped the floor. “You had a choice. Everypony has a choice! You just need to accept the consequences, and you simply chickened out. You didn’t dare to confront your wife!”

“Y-yes.” Saddle mumbled, about to cry.

“You know, Saddle, I always thought you were close to braindead, and that you needed somepony beside you to guide your raw instincts.” I spewed. “It turns out that there was something working inside that big head of yours. It’s just too bad that you neglected it over and over again.”

“I-I am not b-braindead!” Saddle groaned.

“No, you’re just drunk to a point of no return.” I grunted, letting the anger fill my body. “Saddle, you are right in one end. You are a total disgrace, and you have failed me. You have failed the City, because you bowed down to everypony who put you in a tight spot... but you didn’t bow down to me when you had the choice.”

“S-sorry, F-Farsight...” Saddle whined.

“Too late to apologize, old buck.” I shook my head. “I’ve suffered for my mistakes, and you will have to pay for yours. In the end, that’s how the world works. Some ponies call it karma.”

“K-karma is a b-bitch.”

“That’s the wisest thing that has come out of your muzzle since I met you.” I grinned. “Don’t say anything more... you’ll ruin it.”

Saddle looked into my eyes, trying to make me feel bad about what I was about to do; but that train had already left the station. My resolve was unbreakable, and I had no incentive to let him live. Traitors had no place in New Pegasus... real traitors, that is. I lifted the pistol and aimed it between his eyes, which tried to

keep contact with mine, although the amount of alcohol clouding his brain was starting to ruin his focus.

“Goodbye, Saddle.” I mumbled, and pulled the trigger.

**BANG!**

The Appleloosan hat flew away and landed some meters behind, while the body of the stallion tumbled and fell to the floor on a pool of blood. I holstered the pistol and stood looking at the corpse for a moment. I didn't feel any better after having killed him... revenge was not a pleasure for me, it was something I had to do. It was my duty.

“Poor old sod.” Rose mumbled.

“He asked for it.”

“I know. Still, it makes me feel sad, seeing him break down the way he did.”

“He chose that ending for his life. He could have resisted, he could have tried to reason with me, but he preferred to drink himself dumb and cry.”

“He was desperate.”

“I don't get it, though.” I groaned. “If he knew this was going to happen, why the despair? Why didn't he act before?”

“I don't know, Farsight... Ampera dominated him, the same way that Goldie had done before. I think that was what made him disgraceful.”

“He chose to live that way.”

“I suppose he didn't know what he was choosing.” Rose whispered.

“If he did, he was stupid.”

“Mhm.” Rose nodded.

“Let's get moving.” I grumbled. “I doubt that Ampera and Dee will make things that easy.”

We left the empty Casino and walked out to the streets, where no pony seemed to have noticed what had happened inside the Diamonds. The activity of locals kept going on, up and down, apparently unaware of Saddle Buckmare's breakdown and death. My next target would be Ampera, as she had been the alleged responsible for the decision of taking me out of the picture. Besides, dealing with Dee would have me confront Nadyr as well, and I still needed to figure out what to do about him. He kept being my friend, and I wasn't going to become another backstabbing scoundrel just because of my desire for vengeance.

Rose guided me towards the Council Hall building. Ever since New Pegasus and Freedom Field became a unified city, she had left the Tesla Bar aside and had begun spending her time in the government facility. Apparently, she had become fed up of her old job, selling energy weapons to goons and traders, and had accepted her “elevation” gladly, becoming a full-time politician. She had a strong will and a cold mind, and she was fit to lead; but I simply couldn't let her get away with her despicable move.

We walked into the very place where I had been accused of treason and sold to the Republic in exchange for protection, ready to face the former Ranger and her personal guard, but we were welcomed by a Council Hall attendant, who gallantly told us that Councillor Von Ohm was waiting for us in her office.

“Watch out, Rose.” I warned. “Ampera is very smart, and this has all the looks of a perfect trap.”

“I know, Farsight, but we have our own tricks up our sleeves.”

“Still, be careful.” I mumbled. “This is becoming more and more incoherent as we advance. They know I would be out for blood, and yet...”

“Saddle had accepted his fate.”

“No, Saddle had surrendered without fighting. That is a mistake.”

“You can’t win all the time, Farsight.”

“That doesn’t mean that you mustn’t try, Rose.”

We were taken to a small room, painted white and carefully furnished, where Ampera was waiting; sitting behind a large wooden desk. I couldn’t see if she was concealing any kind of weapon, and besides, she had two bodyguards standing behind her, heavily armed and ready to open fire at the former Ranger’s command. It was a sticky situation, since the little space that the room offered gave them the advantage in a firefight.

“Farsight, Rose, welcome.” Ampera waved. “Do sit down, please.”

“What is all this, Ampera?” I smiled malevolently. “I expected a rougher welcome from you.”

“My dear Farsight, has the Tsar turned you into another barbarian?” The former Ranger grinned. “We must be civilized, no matter the odds... everypony must be given the chance to speak.”

“That sounds very coherent, Ampera, considering that you threw me in jail without even letting me defend myself!”

“True, that was a mistake.” Ampera shook her head. “We’re working under pressure here, Farsight. The Republic stands on one side, the Tsar comes from the other side, and we are caught in the middle.”

“That hasn’t changed recently.”

“I know, but you had to come and shake things up for your own good.” The former Ranger grumbled. “By allying yourself with that whore DeHavilland, you jeopardized the security of the entire city.”

“Do I have to remind you that I had your personal support in the operation? We didn’t know what sort of viper’s nest we were messing with.”

“Certainly, I remember having backed you up.” Ampera nodded.

“Then how can you be such a hypocrite, Ampera?”

“You talk to me about hypocrisy, Farsight? You’re the master of that particular field, my blue friend. You’ve been spreading lies and pulling strings every day since the one we met, and I didn’t complain about your ways. Would you mind explaining me what entitles you to chastise me for playing your own game?”

“Ampera, when I acted like that I was a no pony.” I shook my head. “I tried to take advantage of the things around me, because I owed nothing to anypony in town. You, on the other hoof, owe me your status.”

“Do we?” Ampera grinned.

“Yes, you do!” I stomped the floor. “I was the one who shook this place to the ground! I was the one who took Goldie out of the picture by setting up the smear campaign! I was the one who took over Full House’s business and destroyed the Ferratura Family! And most importantly, Ampera, I was the one who chose to unify the two cities and the one that gave you your position as a Councillor. I had no obligation to do that.”

“Your point being?”

“That you owed me loyalty, Ampera. You needed to know your place, and you should have disregarded the Republic’s claims.”

“So, we should have gone to war. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Ampera, the Republic has too much to worry about, apart from occupying New Pegasus. It’s the same thing that happened eight years ago. The Tsar is a necessary enemy, they clashed and there is nothing they can do about it. We, on the other hoof, would be a wasted ally.”

“So what?”

“It could be a military victory, but it would be a political defeat.”

“You’re telling me that we would have to surrender to the NER? Please, Farsight, don’t make me laugh.”

“On the contrary, we would have to resist. Cause them attrition while the Tsar breaks their front, and they

will begin to reconsider their position towards us.”

“Farsight, don’t try to give me lessons in military strategy. I’m a Ranger, remember? I was taught how to fight, and I had my baptism of fire before you even got your Cutie Mark! It wouldn’t be that easy, so we had to give in to their demands. It’s as simple as that. However, I had the feeling that you wouldn’t last long in jail.”

“Rose is the only one who has shown me true loyalty.”

“How noble of her.” Ampera laughed disdainfully. “She’s got you under her skin, there is no denying that. Too bad she’ll have to suffer your same fate.”

“Rose has nothing to do about this.” I groaned.

“She has, Farsight. The same way that your winged lover or your striped friend. They all stand beside you, and they all are a nuisance for the well-being of New Pegasus. The Council will do better without them. The Triumvirate will...”

“Triumvirate?” I grinned. “You’re one member short.”

“What?” Ampera blinked.

“Saddle is lying on a pool of his own blood at the Diamonds, Ampera.” I clenched my teeth while giving the former Ranger a menacing gaze. “He was drunk and torn apart by guilt, the poor disgrace.”

“You killed him?”

“Does that surprise you, Ampera? What do you think I’m here for?”

“You... damned... son of a BITCH!”

Ampera roared, and I heard the detonation of a large shotgun, but I didn’t feel the pellets tearing my flesh apart. Rose had deployed a shield spell just a second before the attack, and the fired ammo was lying on the carpeted floor of the office. I lifted my gun and got ready to fire as soon as the impasse forced by the shield spell came to an end.

“I knew that you were going to do that, Ampera.” Rose grinned. “You’re getting old.”

“There is no way you’re getting out of this alive, you fools.” The former Ranger spewed. “As soon as you lower the shield, my bodyguards will tear you apart.”

“Really.” Rose nodded. “Who says I have to lower the shield?”

Suddenly, Rose’s horn glowed brighter and the pink screen of the shield spell advanced through Ampera, stopping between the Ranger and her bodyguards. I aimed the pistol at her head and smiled while the confused mare tried to realize what had happened.

“So much for your strategy, Ampera.” I winked.

**BANG!**

The body of the mare stumbled two steps back, then fell to the floor with a gaping hole in her head, while the two bodyguards wondered what to do next. Their confused faces and quick looks at each other showed that they hadn’t expected such an outcome.

“Relax, you two.” I smiled. “I have nothing against you. If you lower your guns, I will lower mine, understood?”

“Fine.” One of the bodyguards nodded.

“Perfect.” I replied, holstering the pistol and watching them deactivate their battle saddles. “Now, if you don’t mind, we’ll be leaving.”

The bodyguards shrugged, and we galloped out of the room, just in case they changed their minds a moment too soon. Two of the three Council Members were dead, and only one remained. However, that one would be the most difficult to kill. There were many ties between her and us... ties that couldn’t be severed without

causing greater damage.

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Things were starting to stir up in the streets of New Pegasus as we walked towards our last target. Apparently, the corpse of Saddle Buckmare had been found, and our little fight with Ampera at the Council Hall had not gone unnoticed. Dee would be waiting for us, and it wouldn't be easy to get our job done... even if it wouldn't have been easy anyway. We walked towards the former Freedom Field Town Hall, where Dee had her workplace and home established for over eight years.

Guards were out on the streets, and many of them looked at us with a puzzled face. They knew what was going on, but they didn't know who to root for. Even if Dee would have issued clear orders, forcing them to stop me in sight, the majority of the guards was in doubt. Some of them had conflicted loyalties, and some of them would be pondering which side was the most prone to reaching the final victory.

The streets of Freedom Field were not very crowded, since the population already knew what was going on, and they avoided being close to possible areas of conflict. Indeed, that made our job easier, since having to meander through bystanders would make things much more cumbersome. The door to the Freedom Field Town Hall was guarded by a bunch of armored ponies who tried to stop us from getting in in the first place; but as soon as they saw our determination, they moved and let us in. Once again, I didn't know if it was a matter of fear or a matter of loyalty. The only true thing was that Dee had no more shields to hide behind.

We walked into the large office, where Dee was waiting for us behind her desk, filing papers and typing in a terminal. Always calm, always cold. Nadyr was sitting on a couch that stood on the corner, while Atreid and Harko, their two twins, played around in the floor. Our arrival was like a thunder breaking the peace of a blue sky.

"Took you long enough." Dee whispered.

"Bro..." Nadyr got up. "Is that true? Have you killed Saddle and Ampera?"

"News sure do fly around here." I shook my head. "Yes, I have. What did you expect?"

"I guess you're coming for me, right, Farsight?" Dee shrugged. "I don't blame you, you know. It was a despicable move from our side, but we were forced to make it. It was either you or us."

"What about your loyalties, Dee? I thought you had a high concept of them."

"I do, but loyalty is worthless if you're dead."

"Bro, please." Nadyr mumbled. "Think about it for a second."

"I have thought about it many times." I groaned, taking out my gun.

"Uncle Farsight?" Harko looked at me. "What are you doing?"

"Sorry, Harko, but it is something I have to do."

"No!" Atreid galloped and put herself before her mother. "If you shoot her, you'll shoot me!"

"Atreid, honey, get out of the way." Rose said calmly. "Please."

"Listen to Auntie Rose." Dee brushed her daughter's curly mane. "This is something I asked for."

"No, mom!" Atreid roared. "I'm not letting you die!"

"Uncle Farsight, you'll have to shoot me down too!" Harko put herself in the way.

"Atreid, Harko!" Dee ordered. "Move!"

"NO!" The twins cried.

"Bro, don't do it." Nadyr was aiming at me with his pistol. "If you shoot her, I'll shoot you."

"Nadyr, what are you doing?" I groaned. "You too?"

"No, bro. Dee deserves some punishment, but she doesn't deserve death. Please. Don't make me kill you."

Not after all we've been through."

"Nadyr, darling, lower the gun." Dee said calmly. "We knew what we were assuming when we decided to betray Farsight."

"Hell no!" Nadyr roared.

We stood looking at each other for two or three minutes, our guns lifted and aiming at their respective targets. Nadyr was about to cry, while Dee had accepted what was coming to her and smiled calmly, while trying to soothe her foals. For once, I felt my resolve break. I realized that the retribution wouldn't justify the pain I would cause, and I lowered the gun.

"I... I won't kill you, Dee." I shook my head. "What you did was terrible, but as Nadyr has said, you don't deserve death. I would cause too much pain and sorrow."

"Thank you, bro." Nadyr whispered and lowered the gun.

"Farsight, I... I am sorry." Dee walked to me and lowered her head in defeat. "I have broken your trust, and yet, you have spared my life."

"Dee, listen to me." I mumbled. "I will not let this pass. No pony betrays me and gets away with it, understood? I shall find a suitable punishment for your actions... one that lets you keep your dignity while repaying your debt with me."

"I don't know what to say." Dee mumbled.

"Then don't say anything, Dee. You're a fine mare, and I can understand your feelings. I know that you're torn between two loyalties, and I can even grasp your reasons. It doesn't mean that I forgive you, but at least, I can see the world through your eyes."

"Thank you." Dee turned around and walked back to her desk, while Nadyr came by and hugged me.

"It's so good to see you alive, bro." He smiled. "Oh, and thanks for sparing her life."

"I couldn't just kill her and leave like that." I groaned. "I would hurt you, Atreid, Harko... I simply wasn't able. As soon as I saw the implications of taking that shot..."

"Thank you so much, Farsight."

"No problem, Nadyr. Things are going to get ugly soon, though."

"I know, but we'll get through them, won't we?"

"We'll try." I mumbled. "We'll damn sure try."

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Everything was back in its place, all the loose ends in New Pegasus had been sorted out. All, but one. The most painful and sad one, who waited for me on top of the Horseshoe Spire. The source of all my problems, my condemnation and blessing at the same time. I wondered how I would face her while I walked down the Strip, heading towards the bright lights of my home, wounded, tired and broken; but at peace. Almost at peace, at least.

The elevator ride seemed to last forever, as I was eager to see her once again. Such was the paradox of my existence. She had taken me to the verge of death many times, she had put me in a situation that left me caught in the crossfire, she had played me like a puppet; and yet, despite all those facts, I still wanted to be near her. According to Rose, she was shaken because of our last argument, but she could perfectly be lying. The elevator beeped and the doors opened, leading me to the place that had been my hideout for the last eight years.

"Who...?" I heard her ask. "Farsight!"

Avro galloped towards me and embraced me in a way she had never done before. I felt it to be stale and fake, like everything she had told me, but her eyes were red because of the hours she had spent crying. Tear marks were all over her cheeks, and she had a terrible look.

“Hi, Avro.” I said coldly.

“I... I am so glad to see you! When Pet told me that your airship had...” She started sobbing again.

“Well, I’m fine.” I groaned.

“Farsight, I...”

“We need to talk, Avro.” I sat down on a couch. “Your lies have put me in a situation of no return, you know that?”

“I am sorry, Farsight.” Avro cried. “I am being honest when I tell you that I am really, really sorry.”

“You know, Avro, the problem is that I can’t trust you. You say that you’re sorry, but how do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Does it look like I’m lying?” She sobbed.

“No... well, I don’t know. You’re the only pony I simply can’t read through.”

“Please, Farsight, you have to believe me.”

She walked beside me and caressed me. It was a different type of caress, though. She wasn’t trying to seduce me... it felt like an apology, like a goodbye kiss. Even if I couldn’t discern what she was up to, her body language seemed to be sending another signal. She appeared to be feeling remorse.

“Avro...” I sighed and kissed her gently in the lips. “What am I going to do with you? I simply can’t trust you no more...”

“Farsight...” She replied to my kiss with passion, begging for forgiveness. “Do you still love me?”

“No, I don’t love you anymore.” I said coldly. “I can’t love a pony who constantly lies to me and uses me for her own purposes. However, I simply can’t let you go either. I can’t live with you, but I can’t live without you either.”

Avro lowered her head in sadness.

“Do... do you want me to leave?” She asked.

“No.” I shook my head and sighed. “I... it’s complicated. I want you, I need you, but there’s no way I’m ever going to love you, Avro. Still, that doesn’t mean that I want you out of my life... it only means that we need to figure things out.”

Avro hugged me while crying.

“Hey, don’t be sad.” I smiled. “Two out of three ain’t bad.”

“Yes... I guess you’re right.” Avro smiled. “There is one more thing, Farsight.”

“Oh, yes, I remember. What is it?”

Avro giggled cunningly and whispered into my ear.

“I’m pregnant, Farsight. You’re going to be a father.”

#

Note: Reputation Change

New Pegasus: Back in the saddle. You’ve crushed the opposition within the Council and have returned to your position of power. What consequences will your actions bring, though?

## Chapter 25: Through The Barricades

*“Good afternoon, mares and gentlecolts, and welcome once again to the station that makes your days brighter and your nights shinier! Yes, you guessed it, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, ready and eager to bring you the best music and the most relevant news of the Wasteland! That last hour was intense, wasn’t it? The Molerat Pack, performing live with a full orchestra, is something worth millions, don’t you think? You know what I like the most? Their attitude when they’re on stage. It’s like they were teasing each other, trying to pull pranks or defying each other to outsing the rest. They sure know how to put up a real show, and they have been doing so for a long while. It’s great to hear such a performance live, but the recorded version is also worth listening to!*

*Music will be back shortly, but we need to move on to the news. There have been several reports of unrest in town in the last hours, but according to the Spokespony of the Council, Desert Rose, they have been the product of the insurrection of two members of the City Board, Saddle Buckmare and Ampera Von Ohm. Let’s not forget that these two ponies were married to each other, and that they used to work together in their affairs of state. It seems that their relationship helped to create a conspiracy that attempted to topple the current Government and bring it crashing down. What the plans of this couple were is something that remains a mystery, as Spokespony Rose has not mentioned any reason for their sudden upheaval. Anyway, it seems that things have been already sorted out and the standing Council, led by Farsight, keeps in control of the City.*

*However, these revolts have caused a fairly unwanted effect, as the New Equestrian Republic swiftly removed their embassy in town, evacuating Ambassador Merry Fields to a safe location beyond the walls of New Pegasus. At the same time, there have been reports of part of the NER Army redirecting towards the City, in a move that is worrisome and incomprehensible at the same time. What does the Republic want to achieve by sending troops to our gates? Is it for protection or has the Government of New Canterlot got other plans for our City?*

*We have tried to ask the Council about this particular matter, but they seem to know as much as we do. According to the Spokespony, their last contact with Republican authorities took place a week ago, and there has been no communication from the Two Unicorns ever since. At the question of whether we should prepare for a forthcoming invasion, the young mare shrugged and said that they were working on it. Frankly, we know that the Council is working on it, but things are starting to look grim, and I think that everypony agrees in the fact that we could use some more answers.*

*While we have that particular matter to worry about, the War keeps raging outside, and the forces of the Tsardom are about to take over the East Bank of Hooper Dam. The High Command of the Republican Army doesn’t seem to be willing to call for a retreat, but the last remaining Rangers are entrenched and under siege by hordes of troops that are on the verge of breaking through their lines. Whatever the outcome of the battle is, there is no doubt that the delaying action developed by these forces will have been crucial to the interests of the Republic. Ponies like those are heroes, there is no doubt about it. Those who send them to die, on the other hoof, are not too worthy of praise, in my humble opinion.*

*Anyway, that’s all for this hour, mares and gentlecolts! We’ll be back in sixty minutes, letting you know how all these issues have developed. In the meantime, let’s get back to this magnificent recording of the Molerat Pack, live from the Grand Concert Hall of the Clops! You know, there’s a funny story about this particular show... legend has it that a certain security guard jumped onto the stage to sing with the three crooners, in order to impress a young mare of his liking! We don’t know whether this tale is true or fake, but it sure is funny! Remember, you are listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly into your hearts!”*

A father. I was going to be a father... I never thought there would be something that could simply leave me totally dumbstruck for minutes, but there I was, staring into infinity, babbling incoherent words, while Avro giggled and swept a hoof up and down in front of my face. I could see the white fur flashing before my eyes,

but I was simply too blocked to actually react. A father! Sweet Celestia, I couldn't believe it!

"R-really?" I managed to mumble. "A father?"

"Yes, dummy!" Avro giggled and snugged me. "It's what happens when stallions and mares..."

"I know." I grunted. "Still, I never saw it coming... when did you find out?"

"I was feeling a bit under the weather lately, so I went to the Fort, to have Mixer do a check-up on me. He told me that I was expecting a foal, and judging by the time frame, it has to be yours."

"Wow... I don't know what to say." I mumbled. "I never expected this to happen."

"Well, it has, Farsight." Avro smiled kindly. "I love you, and I want the three of us to be a family."

"Avro, this doesn't change my stance towards you." I replied.

"But you said you needed me."

"I do, I still do." I smiled, calming her. "And believe me, we will be a family, but there are many things that we have to work out."

"For example?"

"I need to learn to trust you, Avro." I shook my head. "If we're going to raise a foal together, we need to be able to count on each other, without any kind of secret. I guess you don't have a problem with that, do you?"

"Of course not, sweetheart." Avro smiled adorably.

"You promise me that you'll never lie to me again?" I asked.

"Of course." Avro nodded.

"Over your own foal's soul?" I said sternly. "Do you promise that you won't use me for your own devices, Avro DeHavilland?"

"Stop being so theatrical, Farsight!" Avro giggled.

"Please, answer me." I frowned.

"Okay, all right." Avro laughed. "Yes, Farsight, I promise. No more lies from now on."

"Good." I kissed her gently. "That's a great place to start from."

"So, what are you going to do now, Farsight?" Avro asked. "After all that we've been through... now that all that is behind us, what should be our next move?"

"I don't know, Avro." I let myself fall and laid on the couch. "Frankly, there is a war still raging out there, and I know for certain that the Tsardom wants to come and destroy the entire city."

"In that case, we should prepare our defences!" Avro pranced, opening her wings wide.

"What would it be good for?" I shrugged. "The majority of the population hasn't handled a gun in years, and it's a bit too late to start training them."

"What about the robots?"

"They would give us some time, but once they start to fall, there would be no chance to repair them before the Tsar broke our defences." I mumbled. "Sunset Hills was devised to act as a robopony factory, but all the issue with Ilyushin sent all my plans for the industrial area to the ground."

"Then what can we do?"

"We must count on the Republic. As much as I dislike that, we need to be ready to help them hold Hooper Dam. After all, the Dam is a narrow pass. All his number advantage would be depleted there, as long as the NER is able to hold the line."

"The Tsar hasn't got pegasi on his side, has he?"

“Not that I know of.” I shrugged. “However, the Republic is supposed to have an Air Force... I wonder what’s taking them so long to deploy it against the Tsar.”

“Pegasi alone are weak targets.” Avro frowned. “That’s why we built the airships. The Republic will need support if it wants to strike from the air, and the Divide is a tricky place to fly through.”

“What about Divide Pass?”

“According to our charts in Breakeven Point, the width of the Pass is really small up in the air. You would need a really good pilot to get an airship through.”

“I see... that would explain it.” I smiled. “Anyway, that means that we’re pretty much in a pinch, Avro. We can’t do anything about the Tsar, but we can’t ignore him either. For now, I need to rest a little bit... All of this has been exhausting.”

Avro giggled and jumped on top of me, enveloping me with her wings.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you relax.” She smiled cunningly, and went on to kiss me.

Suddenly, as I was ready to enjoy the moment, the elevator beeped and the door opened, making us both squeak and jump, like two foals caught in a compromising situation. I looked beyond Avro’s wings and saw an olive-colored pegasus walk into the room with a careless smile in his face. He was dressed in style, with sharp beige trousers and a deep blue shirt that blended in with his turquoise mane.

“Am I interrupting something?” Pet smiled.

“It had to be you, Pet.” Avro smirked. “Oh my, what a look!”

“You like it? I paid a visit to one of the local outfitters. Frankly, you do have a good taste when it comes to clothing!”

“Oh, hi, Pet!” I waved from beneath Avro.

“Hi, Farsight.” Pet smiled and waved back. “It’s good to see you alive and kicking. You haven’t wasted your time, I see.”

“Life is short, you know.” I shrugged. “What brings you here, Pet?”

“Rose needs you in the Council Hall... as soon as possible.”

“I see.” I groaned. “It’s not pretty, isn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t bet on it, Farsight.” Pet shook his head.

“Damn.” I grunted. “Let’s not waste a single second, then. Avro, would you be so kind?”

“Oh, of course.” The pegasus flapped her wings and landed on the floor, giving me the chance to get back up.

“Let me just grab a suit.” I said, heading for my room. “I’ll be with you in no time.”

“Always in style, Farsight?” Pet asked snarkily.

“Always, Pet.” I replied while laughing. “Always.”

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Avro and I followed Petlyakov back into the Council Hall Building, wondering about what was so important to have us quickly summoned to a meeting, considering that it hadn’t been more than ten hours since I had wiped part of the Council out. Rose had to be very worried about something to send the pegasus engineer to my place. I walked confidently, despite the scars I was now forced to wear. The one on my face made me look bad, pretty much like a mobster of the old times, turning my usual expression into a sardonic smirk. Anyway, wearing a clean suit felt like a blessing after all that I had been through.

Besides, I saw Avro under a different light now. She kept being a treacherous liar, but she had an incentive to stay true to me now. If we were to break up, she had much more to lose than a position of power. She would also lose a father for the foal she carried inside her, and as much as it would hurt me to build a wall between

us, I know that she would feel worse, having to be reminded of me every single day he saw her offspring. That analysis didn't mean that I wanted it to happen, but I couldn't stop my brain from processing all the data that surrounded me.

We walked into the hall itself, where I had been judged a day earlier. This time, Rose stood beside the meeting table, walking up and down with a concerned expression in her face. Meanwhile, Dee and Nadyr mumbled things to each other, looking really worried as well. Something was terribly off, and things were about to get really complicated. That's what their faces told me.

"What's going on, Rose?" I asked.

"Take a look at the battle map." The mare pointed at the screen on the wall. "The NER has begun to move... differently."

"What do you mean?"

"The Republic is sending troops towards New Pegasus." Nadyr groaned. "They're still two or three days away from the City, but their destination is no longer Hooper Dam. They are coming for us, without a doubt."

"Do we have any proof that they have been sent here?" I asked, trying to grasp the intentions of the Twin Unicorns.

"No, but you know that they sent an ultimatum." Dee shook her head. "My gut tells me that their movements will have something to do with it."

"I supposed as much..." I groaned. "But we can't take any action without knowing things with certainty. We're risking to start a war with the only ones that can defend us from the Tsar."

"Why does the Tsar want to take New Pegasus?" Dee asked. "We could negotiate our neutrality."

"There is a little problem regarding that. It's not the Tsar who worries me, it's his field commander, Nevski... or Delvio Ferratura, as we used to know him around here."

"Delvio is alive?" Nadyr gasped.

"Indeed, and he wants to burn New Pegasus to the ground... with us in it. That's why we need the Republic."

"Does it mean you'll greet their occupation?" Dee groaned.

"Not at all." I replied calmly. "We just need to settle an alliance."

"What makes you think they'll give in?"

"I don't know, but that doesn't mean that we mustn't try."

"Frankly, Farsight... considering the threats they made last time..." Dee shook her head. "I have very little hopes about a treaty with the NER."

"Hey, everypony!" Pet shouted. "Look, there's an incoming transmission from the NER!"

"Speak of the devil..." I grunted. "Patch it through."

The battle map was substituted by Praline's stern face, that became even sterner when she saw me sitting at the Council Table. I had a really bad feeling about that surprise call, but I had to try and move the odds to my favour... even if they were all against me.

"I didn't expect to see you again, Farsight." Praline's voice was cold and cutting, like a sword made of ice.

"I think the feeling is mutual, Praline. When I saw you leave eight years ago, I hoped that it would be the last time I would have to endure talking to you."

"How bold of you, Farsight, considering your situation."

"My situation? Shouldn't we be speaking about your situation?"

"I think yours is a little bit more delicate." She grinned, and that was no good signal. "You have made one big mistake, you know?"

“What? You mean getting rid of that bombastic Fleet? I never thought you would endorse such a bunch of lunatics... and besides, if you didn’t want me to mess with them, you could have told me.”

“Commander Ilyushin was a fair pony, Farsight.” Praline hissed. “His Fleet could have given us the edge in the battle against those barbarians, but you had to intervene.”

“It was either them or me. Ilyushin wasn’t too prone to diplomatic solutions.”

“You weren’t, either.” Praline looked at me with a chilling gaze. “And in virtue of the treaty the New Equestrian Republic signed with the Communist Pegasi Front, I hereby declare war upon the City of New Pegasus and its population. My troops are already on their way to your walls, and the banner of the NER will soon be hanging from each and every pole in the Strip. Say goodbye to your little kingdom, Farsight.”

The transmission ended with a faint beep, leaving us all cold and devastated. It was, indeed, the worst case scenario that any of us could have actually pictured, and it was already in motion. In a matter of two or three days, the city would be under siege by the forces of the Republic, and there would be nothing to do about it. My mind started working like crazy, trying to devise a plan that could give us the victory against the treacherous forces of the NER.

“What are we going to do?” Avro whined.

“How long can the city subsist, in the event of a siege?” Pet asked calmly.

“Not for too long.” Dee shook her head. “Our supplies were mostly based upon trader caravans, and I am certain that the Republic will have already blockaded them. There will be no more food for New Pegasus, and our reserves will deplete quickly.”

“Can we fight?” Nadyr asked.

“Not really...” I mumbled. “Most of the population is not prepared for a wartime scenario. We would collapse in a matter of minutes.”

“What about air support?” Pet said.

“No, no, no.” Avro shook her head violently. “Have you seen the cannons they have? They would tear us apart!”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Rose mumbled. “Do we have to surrender?”

“No way!” Dee whined. “I’d rather die than see the Republic in New Pegasus!”

“We must evacuate the city.” I said coldly.

“What? Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m dead serious.” I grunted. “We are New Pegasus. The ponies, the population. Wherever we are, we will be able to start from scratch and rebuild a new city... all of this is... expendable.”

“I agree.” Rose nodded. “If we cling to this spot, we will be defeated. If we make a run for it, on the other hoof...”

“Basically, we run and hide until the storm is over, right?” Pet grinned.

“More or less.” I shrugged. “However, the storm will have to be very big to stop them from going against us in a long time. That’s the only way we can start over in peace.”

“As much as I’d love to agree with you, we don’t really have a place to run to, have we?” Dee asked.

“Certainly, we do.” I walked to the terminal and jacked my PipBuck. An instant later, a marker appeared in the battlemap, close to the Divide.

“What is that?”

“According to Ampera, that is the location of an old Steel Ranger bunker called Fortune’s Loss.” I replied. “If she was telling me the truth, there should be an old abandoned base that ought to be full of supplies, ammo, medicines and food. I think it can be the best place to start a new community.”

“Won’t the troops of the Republic find it someday?”

“Well, I doubt they’ll want to get close.” Pet walked to the map and waved a hoof around the Divide. “See? It’s very close to the Divide.”

“Does that mean it’s a dangerous place?”

“Take it easy.” Pet laughed. “It’s not dangerous at all. It may be windy and a bit harsh, but the Divide acts like a wall that protects those small valleys. You won’t have to worry about ponies coming from your back.”

“I see.” Dee scratched her muzzle. “Anyway, the Republic is bound to find Fortune’s Loss someday. If they keep scouting the Territory they’ll get there.”

“That’s why we need to provide a distraction.” I groaned.

“What sort of distraction?”

“I’m still thinking about it.”

“Fine, fine, we’ll sort that out later.” Rose nodded. “How do we get there without the NER hunting us down?”

“I was thinking on setting up a sort of caravan.” I replied. “We get the ponies moving, as long as their possessions. They will have to leave things behind, that’s for certain, but if we do things right, we will be able to relocate the population before the Republic closes the trap around New Pegasus.”

“Do you think it will work?”

“The Republic tends to be very respectful towards trade caravans.” I shrugged. “However, we should get the ponies moving before it’s too late.”

“What do you mean by too late?”

“Well, if the NER forces encircle the City, there will be no way of getting out. We need to evacuate before that happens.”

“I don’t think that will be possible.” Rose shook her head. “There is too much to organize, too many ponies to relocate, before we can even leave.”

“I understand.” I nodded. “In that case, I suggest we send a detachment. Get a group of able ponies, guards, workers, and some random population; grab your gear, and make a run for it before the Republic chokes us.”

“What about the rest of us?” Avro asked.

“We’ll figure something out.” I replied. “One question, Pet...”

“Yeah?” Pet shook.

“Do you think your mates from Breakeven Point could help on the construction of Fortune’s Loss?”

“Certainly! Besides, we have many materials in the old pegasus base.” Pet smiled broadly. “I’ll ping Bleriot and tell him to start working.”

“Perfect.” I smiled as well. “Now, we need somepony to lead the expedition, and I want it to be you, Dee. It will be your mission... and your punishment for your betrayal. I’m sending you to exile.”

“It sounds fair to me.” Dee nodded.

“Bro...” Nadyr muttered. “If she goes, I go. All of us go.”

“Is that what you wish, Nadyr?” I asked, feeling sad about his stance. I knew he would say that, and yet, I didn’t want to lose him. He was one true friend.

“We’re a family, Farsight. What will Atreid and Harko feel when they leave her mother aside, maybe to never see her again?”

“Fair enough, Nadyr. I respect you and I respect your decisions.” I nodded.

“We should get moving.” Dee said calmly. “We need to find a proper group and equip it for the Wasteland.”

Dee and Nadyr left the room hastily, and I couldn't help feeling a hint of sadness for my old companion and his wife. Their endeavour was full of dangers, and I might be sending them to their deaths. However, it was what had to be done.

“Will they have enough time?” Rose mumbled. “The Republic is closing in fast.”

“I thought as much.” I smiled. “Pet, could you reach Aichi from here?”

“Of course.” Pet nodded and fiddled with the terminal. Some seconds later, the battlemat disappeared and the face of a pegasus mare showed in the screen.

“Aichi here.” She said.

“Hi, Aichi, Farsight here.” I replied. “How are things going in Neighliss?”

“We can hear the explosions from here, boss. The war is getting closer every day.” Aichi looked worried. “If things get too hot we'll have to withdraw.”

“Easy now, Aichi, I have one task for you.”

“Go ahead.”

“I want you to fire the remaining missiles at the Republican posts in the East and West banks of Hooper Dam. Then, get the hell out of there and return to Breakeven Point as soon as possible. Understood?”

“But that would open the gates to the Tsardom!” Rose squealed.

“Of course it will, and in the meantime, it will buy us enough time to organize the evacuation.” I grinned.

“Didn't Delvio say he wanted to crush you?” Pet asked.

“He did. However, he will have to deal with the Republic first, if he wants to get to New Pegasus. The NER, on the other hoof, will have to choose between getting here or stopping the Tsar's pony tide. I'm guessing they'll go for the second option.”

“What if they don't?”

“We'll have to take that chance.” I shrugged. “Right now, we're in no position to play safe.”

“I have to agree with Farsight on that one.” Pet nodded.

“Do I fire the missiles, Farsight?” Aichi asked over the communicator.

“Yes.”

“Understood. Setting coordinates... firing missiles.”

The sound of a dozen of roaring rocket engines deafened us, while Aichi nodded and roared an order that we couldn't hear.

“Missiles out, sir.” Aichi smiled. “Permission to retreat?”

“Acknowledged.” I replied. “Thank you, Aichi. Have a safe flight home.”

“No problem, sir. Aichi out.”

The screen turned black and the map appeared once again, while the banks of Hooper Dam were being turned to burning craters because of our attack. I would have loved to have heard the communication channels of the Republican troops when they realized that they were being backstabbed by a small and apparently powerless city. Suddenly, a new communication broke our meeting, and the irate face of Harpsong Heartstrings appeared on the screen.

“What the fuck was that?” She roared.

“It's called a missile attack, Harpsong.” I smiled smugly. “We're at war, remember?”

“Of course I do, Farsight.” She spewed pure rage. “And I also know that this despicable attack of yours will

have consequences. You have wiped out our best troops, giving the Dam to the Tsar and his maniacs!”

“Then I should be happy, shouldn’t I? The pain of my enemy is my pleasure.”

“Oh, no. Our pain shall be your despair, Farsight. I’m going to lead the attack against New Pegasus myself, and I swear that when I get my hooves on you, I’m going to tear you apart.”

“Harpsong, my dearest Harpsong, how can you even say that?” I whined theatrically. “After all the good times we’ve been through, I expected a little more understanding from you. You were so kind and warm that night…”

“Don’t even mention that night.” She hissed. “If I had known what you were up to, I would have let you out to burn in the desert.”

“Such bitterness is improper of you, Harpsong.” I winked. “It even sounds… defeatist.”

“Defeatist, you say? You’re a bit too cocky for a pony that is cornered.”

“I have nothing to lose, so I might as well show some pride.” I shrugged.

“Do what you wish, but I swear to Celestia that I will make you swallow it whole.”

“Sure, go ahead. However, you are forgetting one thing.”

“What thing?”

“A certain group of enemy soldiers that will be overflowing your right flank if you insist on coming to get me, Harpsong. You know them; rude, harsh, wearing dragon helmets… the kind of ponies you wouldn’t invite for dinner.”

“Ha ha.” Harpsong smirked. “You are one pain in the flank, Farsight.”

“I feel honored for those kind words.” I bowed.

“Go to hell.” She fumed, and stopped the transmission.

“Well, that was rude.” I laughed.

“They haven’t liked your plan, Farsight.” Rose mumbled. “Now they have another reason to get to New Pegasus.”

“That doesn’t really worry me.” I sighed. “As soon as the Tsardom crosses the Dam, the Republic will be in such a tight spot that they will give us time to handle things.”

“Really? Can we evacuate the whole town?”

“I didn’t say that.” I groaned. “I said that we’ll be able to get things sorted out… there are more ways to escape this situation than evacuating the City.”

“What do you mean?” Rose blinked.

“Patience, Rose.” I grinned.

“Farsight!” A guard entered the room at full gallop. “The caravan is ready to leave. You might want to speak to them one last time.”

“Certainly!” I pranced. “After you.”

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The Strip was packed with lots of ponies dressed in Wasteland gear, armored, grizzled and mostly scared. Many of the members of the caravan had been born and raised in New Pegasus, and they simply had no idea of what stood behind the City Gates. One could see tough stallions, frail mares, foals and fillies, even elderly ponies that might not make it to their destination, but it was better than to be trapped between two tides. On the front end of the caravan, checking some supply chariots that had been somehow smuggled into town, Dee was walking up and down nervously, clad in a leather armor that gave her a funny look.

Meanwhile, Nadyr stood close to a group of guards, talking about the state of the guns and the route they would have to take to get to Fortune's Loss without risking an encounter with the Republic or the Tsardom; while Atreid and Harko were sitting on a chariot, looking at the neon lights of New Pegasus with a sad face. It was their home, and it would always be; but they were forced to leave forever.

"Farsight, you're here." Dee smiled.

"You seem worried." I replied with another smile.

"Wouldn't you be? We don't know what we will face out there."

"Trust me, it's not that bad. The real danger is not the Wasteland, but the ponies out there. By which I mean the forces of the NER and the Tsar, naturally."

"I guessed as much." Dee shrugged. "Anyway, Farsight, what are we supposed to do once we get there?"

"You should find a bunker there." I replied. "If Ampera didn't lie to me, there should be enough supplies to help you start anew. Besides, Pet and his team will be there, guarding the skies."

"I see. Well, there is more to win than there is to lose, isn't it?" Dee smiled sadly. "Anyway, Farsight, the ponies are scared. Many of them haven't seen the Wasteland... I suppose you should speak to them."

"Yes, you're right." I nodded, and I jumped onto a chariot, so that everypony could see me. Then, using my magic as a loudspeaker, I addressed the caravaners.

"My friends!" I said with a calm and solemn tone. "My brothers and sisters, we are facing dire times indeed. This world is harsh and unforgiving, and it has turned its back on us, putting New Pegasus in a terrible situation. We can't remain here no longer, for the forces that are beginning to engulf us have clearly stated that they want us as a hunting prize; but I promise you that it won't happen! We have been free for two centuries, and we will keep being free, even if it's in a different place! I know that you all have ties to these streets and buildings... memories, possessions, wealth. Those ties are hard to sever, there is no denying that, but New Pegasus is not a bunch of old buildings! Not at all! The soul of New Pegasus resides in its citizens, in the ponies that have written the tale of their lives within this walls, and New Pegasus will endure as long as those tales have a continuity. That's why we have to leave, we have to endure our exodus into a new safe haven. A safe haven that is close, and that will be the birthplace of a new town that will endure another two centuries or more! Fear not the Wasteland, for I have seen it, and it's nothing that any of you can't confront. Beware of the ponies you might find, for their intentions towards you might not be noble, and keep together through the journey. Follow your leader, Dee Cleff, with faith and patience; and I promise that this particular chapter of your lives will have a happy ending."

The caravan stirred, a rumbling noise echoing through its members, until one pony began to cheer my name. Suddenly, as if swallowed by the tide, the rest of the ponies pranced and yelled, dispelling their fears in an exercise of self-motivation. They just needed the proper push, and they would believe in themselves.

"Nice job, Farsight." Dee smiled and nodded, while I jumped down from the chariot and returned to the head of the caravan. "That was what they needed to hear. Not one word more, not one less."

"I've always known how to string words together." I smiled.

"Of course you have." Dee smiled too, and hugged me. "Thank you, Farsight, for these eight years."

"You're welcome, Dee. Good luck in your journey."

Nadyr came by, barely holding the tears back. It was a rather uncanny image, that of the cold killer almost broken by the feelings, and it made me smile and shed a tear as well. We had lived so many things together, that it was hard to see him leave.

"Bro, gimme a hug." He embraced me tightly, about to cry. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me too, Nadyr, me too." I patted him on the back. "We've been through quite a lot of things, haven't we?"

"Yeah. Remember when we first met?"

"Of course I do, Mister Black."

“Heh, yes, Mister Blue. You couldn’t even fire straight.”

We both laughed and stood embraced in silence, letting the tears flow freely.

“Goodbye, Farsight. I would like to say ‘until we meet again’, but I think that you have other things in mind.”

“I might have, but I haven’t decided anything yet. Good luck, my brother.”

We broke our embrace while Dee controlled the opening of the gates. The first chariots were already leaving New Pegasus, and the caravan began moving slowly, like a giant snake slowly crawling through the sandy floor, heading for an uncertain destination. The half-zebra turned around and joined her wife in one last adventure, crossing the walls and walking into the open Wasteland once more... this time, however, I wouldn’t be by his side.

As the last members of the caravan left the City and the gates closed behind them, I began to put the last steps of my plan into motion. There was one loose end I wanted to tie before it was too late, and I needed somepony to help me with that. I walked back into the Council Hall at the fastest pace I could, trying to find one certain pegasus that would answer the questions I had. Petlyakov was lazing around in the Council Hall room, lying on the table while whistling a tune. He was a funny individual indeed.

“Pet, I need your help.” I asked.

“Oh, Farsight!” He rolled and jumped back onto the floor. “Sorry about that... what do you need me for?”

“First of all, I need to ask you some questions.”

“Go ahead.”

“In the event of a cataclysm... let’s say, a balefire attack over New Pegasus... would the Divide react in some way?”

“Well, it depends on the magnitude of the attack... However, considering how far we are from the Divide, I hardly believe it would be affected by any weapon that we know of being fired here.”

“Then, what would happen to Fortune’s Loss?”

“I’d say that they wouldn’t even notice.” Pet grinned. “I see where you’re going, Farsight, and let me tell you one thing: It’s a great idea, an example of calculated risks.”

“Cut the crap, Pet.”

“Sure, Farsight. Anyway, Fortune’s Loss is shielded by the Divide, and the winds usually blow away from it. Any trace of radiation from New Pegasus wouldn’t reach the new settlement. I can give you a 95 percent probability.”

“Those are strong numbers.”

“Besides, should things get ugly, we could relocate the population in Breakeven Point.”

“How will you manage that?”

“We have some Mystrals left. It wouldn’t be too hard to organize a working cab service.”

“Ha ha, pegasus cabbies.” I laughed. “I would love to see that.”

“Farsight, please, let’s keep things professional.” Pet smiled.

“Yeah, yeah.” I waved a hoof dismissively. “I think that you know what I’m going to ask you...”

“You tend to be a surprising fellow, Farsight. Tell me what you want.”

“I need the Enola rigged to blow.” I said sternly. “At full power.”

“I knew it.” Pet nodded. “It can be done quickly. What sort of igniting mechanism do you want? A timer? Proximity? Booby trap?”

“Just a trigger. I’ll fire it myself.”

“But... where will you hide from the explosion?”

“Who says that I’m going to hide?”

“I see.” Pet remained silent. “Well, if that’s your will, I’m not the one to judge. I’ll give you a working trigger... do you want it built into your office in the Spire?”

“That will do.”

“Cool. I’ll have Junkers make the connections... we should get it done in a couple of hours.” Pet smiled sadly. “One more thing, though, Farsight... what about the rest of the population?”

“There’s a working Stable beneath the City. I’ll make use of it... which leads me to another question.”

“What is it?”

“How long will the radiation endure?”

“Hm... considering the data we have on gemstone depletion... I’d say that three years is a lower boundary. After that time, the levels of radiation will be bearable, as long as you don’t stay around the blast area for too long. Of course, the longer you wait, the safer it will be.”

“Three years... it will have to do.” I mumbled. “By the way, Pet, would you be able to fit a small holding Vault into the underhalls of the Horseshoe?”

“According to the city blueprints, there’s already one you could use. It’s on room A16, level B1.”

“Perfect.” I nodded. “Thank you, Pet... carry on to prepare the Enola. I’ll have another matter to attend to.”

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Standing in front of the large cog-shaped gate, I felt as if my life was coming to a point of convergence. I had descended into the tunnel with a strange feeling in my gut, similar to the one I felt in the old Neighborleans, and for a moment, I expected to see my younger self creeping out of the Stable, weak, scared and broken. However, there was nothing more in that tunnel than me, the gate, the sewer exit that Ampera had diligently provided, and twenty heavily armed guards that would help me carry on with that final task.

I walked to the terminal that governed the gate controls, while feeling a strange mixture of emotions. It was a return to my past, yes, but to a part of my past that I really despised. The hypocrisy, the corrupt hierarchy, the injustice that had been taking place within those walls was simply terrible. On the other hoof, I felt that it was my duty to do what I was about to do, but it was a duty that I was simply willing to undertake. In fact, I had the hunch that I would clearly enjoy that moment.

The terminal clicked and beeped while my PipBuck fought the security protocols. Probably, the ponies inside would have already noticed that there was something tinkering with their main gate, so I warned the guards that followed me to be on alert. Some minutes later, the terminal gave in and the large gate began to move, screeching and moaning as it was removed from its place and rolled aside.

The lights of the Stable entrance filled the tunnel, and we began to march into the steel-plated chambers of the underground shelter. Soon, a group of security enforcers, dressed in those hateful yellow and blue jumpsuits, tried to stop our group. We showed them no mercy, as shotgun pellets ripped their flesh and shattered their bones. They were only the first.

By the time we got to the Atrium, there were already dozens of ponies waiting, looking worried and scared, as they had heard gunshots inside the Stable corridors. I walked in front of my group of guards, smiling carelessly as I saw the faces of my former neighbors looking at me in astonishment.

“Isn’t that...” I heard.

“It is! Look at him!”

“He can’t be... he’s covered in scars!”

“It’s been eight years, you moron. We don’t know squat about the world out there, so a bunch of scars is more than likely.”

“Is he really Farsight?”

“Yes, he is! What is he doing here?”

“Does the Overmare know?”

Ah, the Overmare. It all boiled down to her.

“Somepony let her know Farsight’s here... and that he’s not alone.”

“What does he want?”

“I have no idea...”

“Is it because of the Lottery?”

“I suppose, why else would he come here with those ponies?”

Hearing them suffer as they imagined what they were about to be a part of made me smile in glee. I have never considered myself a sadist, nor have I enjoyed with the suffering of other ponies, but my wish for revenge was starting to be fulfilled. It had been there, dormant for eight long years, while I fought to reach the top, but I had never forgotten about it. It was something that would appear in my sleep every now and then, and that I would dismiss with a ‘later’, but there would be no more delays. Their time had come.

“What is all this racket?” The Overmare’s voice rose over the multitude. Oh Luna, was I going to enjoy this.

“My dearest Overmare!” I pranced. “It’s been a very long time, so good to see you!”

“Fa-Farsight?”

“Yes, Overmare, it’s me.” I smiled dimly. “Have you missed me all these years?”

“I... err... uh...” She was conflicted between what she wanted to say and what she had to say. “Does that even matter, Farsight?”

“Of course it doesn’t.” I laughed. “I haven’t really missed the Stable, Overmare. I was just playing with you. Please forgive me.”

“Na-naturally. What brings you here, Farsight?”

“Well, it has been a really long time since I was forced to leave this place, so I thought I could return and pay you a small visit, don’t you think? Just for old times’ sake.”

“I see... then what about all these armed ponies? Why did you shoot the entrance guards?”

“My friends can be a bit twitchy sometimes... I pray for your forgiveness.” I lowered my head theatrically. “I didn’t know what sort of a welcome I would get, so I brought them for protection... that is all.”

“Protection from a group of unarmed ponies?”

“I am only one. If you wanted to, you could break me to smithereens.”

“We’re not violent, Farsight. I don’t know what the outside world has done to you, but we try to abide some rules down here.”

“Certainly, Overmare.” I smiled. “There are some things that I would like to discuss with you in private... could we continue this conversation in your office?”

“Sure. Follow me.”

The Overmare walked in front of me, opening a path through the mass of scared Stable Dwellers, who mumbled in low-pitched voices and looked at me and my guards with primal fear written all over their faces. They knew what was coming to them, but they clung to the hope of something else taking place. We reached her office on the top floor, with a round window overlooking the large Atrium where all the ponies had been

gathered. She sat on her chair behind the standard Stable-Tec desk, while I made myself comfortable before her.

“What do you want from us, Farsight?”

“Answers, Overmare. Did you know that there is a City right above Stable 188?”

“A City? What city?”

“The City of New Pegasus, Overmare. A large, vivid, working town that had been standing for over more than two hundred years, unharmed by the War.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Look at me, Overmare. Does it look like I come from a barren Wasteland?”

“You’re wearing a sharp suit... so I guess that’s a no.”

“Exactly. Don’t go telling me that you didn’t know about it. Even with the Lottery and all that.”

“Frankly, Farsight, you’ll have to trust me.” The Overmare lowered her head. “We lived ignorant of the outer world. My predecessor gave me the instructions recorded by Scootaloo herself and told me that we would be safe as long as we stayed within the walls. The gate would be opened only once a year, because it was dangerous to have the mechanism working at a higher rate... and because the world outside was apparently uninhabitable.”

“And yet, we kept sending ponies outside, to their apparent deaths.”

“It was a sacrifice that had to be made! The Stable population had to be maintained within numbers!”

“I tried to reason with you, Overmare. There were no numbers proving that. In fact, we had an overflow of food and supplies, and you know that.”

“Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you listen to me?”

“I was scared, Farsight. Very scared. The whole responsibility of the Stable relied upon me. What if your calculations were wrong and we suffered a famine? What if ponies started to die because I had overridden the instructions? All those deaths would be in my conscience forever.”

“Oh yes? And what about the deaths of those you cast out, like ME?”

“Those were necessary sacrifices.” The Overmare shook her head. “As much as I didn’t like them, they had to be done.”

“You see, Overmare, I don’t believe you. You can rest easy, because none of those ponies died in the Wasteland. They became part of the population of New Pegasus... police ponies, librarians, croupiers... they all live a better life. However, I know about your schemes. I know how some families were spared the dangers of the Lottery.”

“There is no way you’ll be able to prove that.”

“So you don’t deny it!” I roared.

“Why should I?” The Overmare laughed. “You won’t be able to accuse me of anything, and it will be your word against mine. Who do you think the Dwellers will believe?”

“I don’t care who they believe, Overmare. I just know that I was right all along.”

“Is that what you came for, Farsight? To prove yourself better and brighter than all of you? To fulfil your desires of superiority?”

“No, Overmare, that’s not what brings me down here. You see, I told you that there is one living city above the Stable... a city that has been working perfectly for decades. However, the world around it has changed, and there are forces outside that threaten the welfare of the population. There is a war raging between two

massive armies, and we are caught in the middle with no choice of running away. That's why, as ruler of New Pegasus, I'm claiming the property of this Stable."

"You, ruler of New Pegasus?"

"Are you surprised?" I grinned. "I was going to be Overstallion, after all."

"I guess I shouldn't be... but what do you mean that you're claiming the property of the Stable?"

"Well, let's say that there are some ponies out there that need a proper shelter until the storm is over. You are going to provide that shelter."

"You're crazy, Farsight. There's no way we're leaving the Stable."

"I knew you'd say that." I smiled. "Anyway, I have already thought of a viable outcome. Please, let's return to the Atrium. The whole Stable has to witness this."

"What do you...?"

"To. The. Atrium. NOW." I hissed.

The Overmare gulped and walked back out of the office, down the stairs and into the multitude that remained on the large hub of the Stable. Their faces showed their fear and mistrust, and some of them were even crying. It was... beautiful. The Overmare and I returned to the middle of the Atrium, where I bowed to all the Dwellers and smiled.

"You see, mares and gentlecolts, there is one living world beyond the gates of the Stable. A world in which ponies have managed to survive, a world in which they have built living communities, and where they have reached happiness and completion. This world, however, is threatened by many forces, both natural and ponylike, that want to tear that happiness and harmony apart, forcing peace-loving ponies to flee and suffer. Such is the fate of the City of New Pegasus, which stands above your heads. We are almost besieged by warring forces that want our destruction, and our chances to flee have been cut off. That's why we resort to you, Stable 188! You will serve the glorious purpose of keeping the population of New Pegasus safe until these dire times have gone by!"

"You're out of your mind, Farsight!" The Overmare yelled. "We are not giving you the Stable! We are not leaving these halls!"

"Who says you are going to leave, anyway?" I smiled and lifted a pistol right in front of her head. The Overmare gasped.

"What is this?"

"Overmare," I said formally, while grinning from ear to ear, "let me express my infinite gratitude for your sacrifice today. Rest assured that the lives of the ponies of New Pegasus are forever in debt with you. We shall never forget you, and what you've done for us."

**BANG!**

The Overmare's body fell like a rag doll to the floor, while blood poured from the bullet wound in her head. The Dwellers gasped and cried when they saw me murder their leader, and I couldn't help to feel a rush of satisfaction from their realization.

"Leave nopony alive." I ordered swiftly.

The halls of Stable 188 became a massive carnage, as bullets tore ponies apart, without making distinction between mare, stallion, filly or foal. It was my vengeance, the payback for what they had done to me eight years ago. I had sworn that I would do it, and I had stood up to my word... and while the explosions and the cries of death entangled into a bloody symphony, I stood in the middle of the Atrium, laughing until my throat ran dry.

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The Stable had been cleaned, and the bodies of the dead Dwellers had had their PipBucks removed. Then, the

corpses had been piled up on the outside and burnt to ashes before the troops of the NER or the Tsar arrived. The stench of death flooded the air, while I walked back to the Strip as if nothing had happened. There were some issues I had to settle before taking the last step in my plan, and those issues required me to go to the studios of New Pegasus Radio. There was one certain mare I needed to speak to.

Miss New Pegasus was sitting on a stool in front of a console full of levers and buttons, while a microphone hung some meters away from her head. She looked equally bored and worried, while she handled the controls of whatever that console did. A record was spinning on one side, playing the music that would be aired on the waves. As I walked in, she looked up and smiled.

“Farsight, welcome to the Station.” She smiled. “What brings you here? Do you want another interview?”

“No, not at all.” I waved a hoof. “I suppose you are aware of the situation.”

“Yes... There’s little hope, right?”

“Certainly... the forces of the Tsar have engaged those of the Republic close to the gates. They’re going to turn New Pegasus into their battlefield pretty soon, but we have one line of defence.”

“What kind of defence are you talking about, Farsight?”

“Roboponies.” I replied. “They will buy us enough time to hide.”

“Hide? Where?”

“There is one Stable beneath New Pegasus. I have ensured that the place is empty and ready to be used by the population.”

“I see. Won’t the forces of the NER or the Tsardom find it?”

“I have one last ace up my sleeve.” I smiled.

“Care to let me know?”

“I’m sorry, but this time I’m keeping my secrets to myself.” I replied. “We need to have an element of surprise if you want this plan to succeed.”

“I suppose that you need me as part of your plan.” Miss New Pegasus snickered. “Why else would you bother to come here?”

“I do need you, and I do need your station.” I grinned sadly. “We must send one last message of hope and resistance to the population. We must make the invaders believe that we’re going to put up a fight, so that they take their time before trying to break through our lines. Will you be able to do that?”

“An inspirational speech?” She smiled, her eyes shining. “Of course! That is something I’ve always been willing to do.”

“I’m counting on you for this endeavour... and for one more thing.”

“What is it, Farsight?”

“Once you descend to the Stable... you will be trapped there for some time... not a week or two, but years. Perhaps you won’t be able to return to the open world again. In such situations, morale is hard to maintain... That’s where you come in. I’ve noticed that many ponies in the City listen to your station, as it keeps their spirits up. New Pegasus Radio has always been there, through the good and the bad times. In the Stable, there is one working broadcasting system. I want you to be there and to carry on doing your job for those who share the Stable with you. Will you do that for me?”

“Of course, Farsight.” Miss New Pegasus smiled with tears in her eyes. “I won’t disappoint you.”

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Pet was waiting for me outside of the New Pegasus Radio building, with a satisfied smile on his face. It seemed like he didn’t care about what was going on in town, or as if he simply was too cool to even be affected by it. Either way, I preferred him to stay calm and efficient, rather than having him freak out because

of any unknown reason.

“Hi, Pet.” I waved.

“Hello, Farsight.” Pet smiled. “Job’s done. The Enola has been rigged to blow as soon as you press the big red button.”

“Perfect.” I nodded.

“Farsight... are you totally sure about it?”

“About what?”

“You know that we can build a remote switch in the Stable... or we can fire it from a gunship ourselves. You don’t have to do it yourself, if you don’t want to.”

“No, Pet, I have to. I don’t want to leave anything to chance, because if the Enola fails, all the plan will come crashing down. I want to be sure that every single element comes together.”

“I see...” Pet looked to the floor. “Look, Farsight. I don’t really know you, but... I admire you. I’ve seen things in you that I find praiseworthy, true virtues in this world of madness. You’ve been patient, persevering, brave and magnanimous. You’ve been a true hero for these ponies.”

“Pet, I thank you for your kind words, but I disagree. I am no hero. My mistakes have brought us to this situation, so I’m just cleaning up my own mess. I would hardly call that noble or heroic, nor virtuous.”

“Tell me, Farsight, have you known a pony that hasn’t made mistakes in his life?”

“No.”

“Exactly. However, even if all of us make the wrong choice here and there, only a few of us are brave enough to accept the consequences and to clean up their own mess, as you have just said. I know that I won’t convince you, but mark my words, Farsight. You are a good pony, a hell of a good one. None of those who have met you have remained indifferent to you... you’ve left a mark in all of us.”

“Thanks, Pet.” I hugged the pegasus. “Now leave before the NER brings its flak cannons. You and Junkers should make it to Breakeven Point as soon as possible.”

“Of course, Farsight.” Pet saluted in a militaristic fashion. “We’ll keep an eye on the skies above Fortune’s Loss for you, okay?”

“You do that.” I smiled. “Have a safe flight.”

Pet nodded and flapped his wings, taking off in a swift move. I remained there, gazing at the pegasus fly away, while I wondered about his words and those of Littlepip. Maybe, if things had gone differently, I could have been able to do more? Maybe, if I had taken other choices, I would have gone down a brighter path for all the Wasteland? I quickly disregarded the thoughts and returned to the plan... my last gambit.

There was little more to do, and time was effectively running out. The cannons could be heard sooner minute by minute, and the roboponies deployed on the walls had begun engaging the first ponies of each faction, who were trying to run and get to New Pegasus before we had had time to establish a proper defence. Ponies were already gathering in the streets, close to the Stable, as the guards had been spreading the news about the forced relocation of the remaining population. Their faces showed fear and anguish, as the Stables were something often associated to critical mistakes that had ended up with terrible consequences for their Dwellers.

This one was different, though. I had lived there, and I knew how it functioned. It had crops working inside, a stable reactor, working air and water systems, and enough room to lodge the remaining ponies of New Pegasus with a certain level of comfort. However, such a community required a hierarchy; one that would stay strong during the time of their confinement. In order to do that, I knew exactly what pony I needed.

Rose was packing her stuff in the little apartment she had lodged herself in, ever since she felt that she needed a pinch more of intimacy. She smiled as she folded her suits and gowns into a small suitcase, but her smile was sad and full of sorrow. That was going to be a tough moment for all of us, no matter how deeply

we had assimilated the inevitable end.

“Hi, Rose.” I walked into the room.

“Oh, Farsight, hello. I didn’t hear you coming in.” She smiled and stopped packing things. “How are you?”

“I’m fine... as fine as one can be today.”

“Yes, I understand that feeling... I think I’m in the same situation.” Rose sighed. “What will happen next, Farsight? Why did you send us all to the Stable?”

“I think you already know why.”

“Well, the Stable is probably the safest place to hide, but what will happen when the forces of the Republic find it? We’ll be cornered like molerats.”

“The Republic will not want to set a hoof in New Pegasus after I’m finished.” I said coldly.

“Oh no. You won’t mean the Enola device...”

“I do.” I nodded. “It’s the only way to keep the NER and the Tsardom away from the Stable. If the world above becomes deadly for them, they won’t bother to find the missing population.”

“But... who will activate the bomb?”

“I will.” I replied.

“You? From inside the Stable?”

“No. From the top of the Horseshoe Spire.”

“But... but that will mean that...”

“Yes. It’s a sacrifice that I have to make, just like you have to hide in the Stable and Nadyr has to begin anew in Fortune’s Loss. Each one of us has a role that must be fulfilled.”

“But why, Farsight? Why can’t you hide as well?”

“In the end, Rose, it’s me who they want. Praline, Harpsong and Stonetree want me imprisoned in some dark and murky NER jail. Delvio wants me dead. None of them have anything against you once I’m gone. If I survive, I will be luring them towards you, and I don’t want that to happen. Not to you, not to Avro, not to Nadyr, not to nopony. The only way to guarantee peace is to disappear from the equation. Otherwise, it will be an endless loop.”

“But Farsight, we need you!”

“That’s bullshit. You don’t need me, you can do very well on your own.”

“That’s a lie, Farsight, a bloody lie!” Rose cried. “You are the one that brought us to the top! You saved me from the raiders! You turned Nadyr into a respectable family pony! You saved Avro and made her redeem herself! If it hadn’t been for you... none of this would have happened.”

“Yes, but by doing all that, I’ve caused pain and anger along the Wasteland. Feelings that will only disappear if I do the same thing.”

“Farsight, please, stay with us.”

“Rose, my decision is final.” I shook my head. “I’m not going to change it for anything or anypony.”

“But I-”

“No, Rose. I need you to understand that I have to go.”

“N-nooooo...” Rose cried.

I hugged her and cried as well. The angst of separation, I guess... after all we had lived together, we were like brothers. Knowing that we would never meet again was heartbreaking, but there was no other way. I knew that she would understand, and that she would get over it. Rose was smart and mature enough to take

the blow and get up again, with renewed strength and resolve.

“Rose, I’ll never forget you.” I smiled. “You’re the thing I’m most proud of. You’ve grown to become a great mare, intelligent, fair, noble and brave. You’ve overcome all the hardships the world has thrown to us, and you’ve shown that heart of gold you have.”

“Thank you, Farsight.” She sobbed.

“However, I need to give you one last task... one task I need you to swear that you’ll complete.”

“Of course!” She pranced. “Tell me.”

“I have... cleaned a Stable down there. I’ve killed many innocent ponies to make room for you, and I know that you won’t like it. However, that Stable is yours to inhabit right now, and I need an Overmare... a pony that will keep order and will bear the responsibility of her fellow Dwellers. I want that Overmare to be you.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the most adequate one for that task. You’re reliable, you’re just, and you’re smart enough to handle any situation that might take place within the Stable. You’ll require patience and good will, because the convivence in there will be hard, and sometimes even tight; but I am sure that if there’s a pony that can make others understand each other, that’s you. You’ll be surrounded by good ponies that will help you: technicians, guards, entertainers... but you’ll have to decide which tasks to give them and how to manage your little world. You’ll take the tough decisions, and you’ll be held responsible for them. Is that something you can manage?”

“How long will it be?”

“Three years. I’ll rig the controls to open the gates when that time has passed. However, we don’t know what will happen, so you might be forced to stay there longer. You will have supplies, that I guarantee you.”

“Don’t even worry about it, Farsight. I’ll take the lead.”

“Once the gates open, though, you will need to guide all those ponies through the Wasteland and into Fortune’s Loss... if it’s still standing. I have no idea about how the explosion of the Enola will affect the area, but I advise caution. Radiation will be there, and who knows what more! Still, I reckon that you will be able to get there. I just hope that Nadyr and Dee manage to keep the settlement running for those three years.”

“Farsight, I won’t disappoint you.” She stood strong and smiled, even with the tears in her eyes. “I will get the population to Fortune’s Loss!”

“One more thing before we leave, Rose.” I smiled sadly. “Back at Breakeven Point, I had a chat with a certain unicorn of great relevance... a very deep and insightful chat, even if I wasn’t in the greatest mood for philosophy and such. She told me that the Wasteland was eagerly awaiting a hero, somepony that would go beyond its own desires and that would devote its life to the greater good... somepony untainted by the evils of the Wasteland, free from its dark grasp. She thought that I was the one meant to do that... to save Equestria from what we had done to it. I disregarded her words as the ramblings of a jaded pony who had given all she had got to obtain nothing, but I’ve come to realize that, even at a smaller scale, the world does need such individuals.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Well, Rose, even if that certain pony thought that I was the one destined to do such a noble deed, I know that she was mistaken. I am no hero. I’ve never wanted to be a hero... I have been selfish and cruel, just like each and every pony out there. However, when I see you, I think that you’re the pony she was looking for... I believe that both in the Stable and in Fortune’s Loss, you’ll be able to bring light into the darkness. If there is a pony that deserves to be called a hero... I think that would be you, Desert Rose.”

“I... I don’t know what to say.” Rose mumbled.

“Perhaps it’s best not to say a word.” I smiled. “Let’s go.”

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The queue went on and on and on, almost losing itself on the horizon, as the ponies eagerly awaited to enter the Stable with their luggage and possessions. Outside, the enemy cannons thundered and some of the outer buildings of New Pegasus had begun to burn because of the heavy shelling. From the other side, we could hear the barbaric roaring of the Tsar's hordes, rapidly approaching the walls, as the roboponies unleashed laser and gatling fire against them. The day was coming to an end, and the neon lights gave the emptying city an eerie look.

I stood by the Stable Gate, watching every pony walk into the shelter, where they were welcomed by Avro and Rose and they were given a PipBuck, that had belonged to one of the previous Dwellers. No words were said, and the faint smiles and dreary looks reflected what was to happen soon. Once the gate closed, they would be locked inside, and they wouldn't see daylight for at least three years. Even if the prospect of a known time frame was soothing, that gaping mouth into the bowels of the deep was really imposing.

The ponies kept on walking for half an hour, and the line came to an end. The plan was coming together perfectly, and despite all that, I felt the sadness fill me. I wanted to live, I wanted to run into the Stable and hide, but I knew that it couldn't be. I simply wouldn't let the scheme that I had carefully crafted come crashing down just because of a moment of weakness. If that meant my destruction, so be it.

Avro and Rose walked to the gate and looked at me with tears in their eyes.

"Farsight..." Avro cried.

"Hush now." I smiled and kissed her gently. "I'll be there for you, trust me. Take care of yourself... and of our foal."

"I will..." She sobbed.

"And Rose..." I smiled at the pink mare. She looked so mature now! "Remember what I told you. You're my finest achievement, and I shall never forget you."

"Neither will I." She smiled, even if the tears rolled down her cheeks.

I walked to the gate controls and pressed a button. The massive cog with the '188' printed on it hissed, whined and rolled back to its place, locking itself tightly and leaving me outside... alone. It was time for the grand finale.

#

Note: Reputation change

New Stable 188 / Fortune's Loss: Hero. Your name shall be remembered forever by the ponies of these communities.

## Chapter 26: What It Is

*“Good evening, mares and gentlecolts, and welcome to the station that has always been by your side, bringing you the best music and entertainment in Neighvada, as well as the latest news and stories of the world around us. Yes, that’s right, you’re listening to New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, always delighted to be by your side. That was one beautiful piece, was it not? You know, Octavia has that charming quality that always keeps you dreaming while you listen. No matter how long the distance or how deep the abyss between the time of the recording and now, I can picture her playing on stage, in a show of grandeur and elegance. No doubt she’s considered a classic!*

*Let’s move on to less beautiful or charming things... My dearest listeners, no matter how hard we’ve tried to avoid it, no matter how much our leaders have toiled to keep this from happening... the War is upon us. Armies of the Tsar and the Republic have moved on to encircle our glorious City, with the intent of conquering it and adding New Pegasus to their list of trophies. These are dire and sad times indeed, folks, as our hopes and dreams have come crashing down because of the deadly ambition of those ponies who think that the Wasteland is their little playground. Our history of peace and prosperity will suffer a backlash, a dark period from which we will have to recover...*

*A time in which we will have to go silent, my dearest listeners. Yes, this is our final address to the world, as New Pegasus Radio will be forced to shut down during the time of conflict. The reasons are simple: the safety of our own workers has become compromised, and no matter how much we want to keep being the voice of information and entertainment in Neighvada, we just can’t do it if we’re risking our hides at each step. That’s why we have been forced to take this painful decision. One day, when this all is over, we shall return to the waves with more strength and will, ready to make up for the upcoming time of silence!*

*Let me get personal for a second, mares and gentlecolts. My time as anchorpony has been relatively short, if we compare it to that of my predecessor Mister New Pegasus, but it has been intense and rewarding. I have learnt a lot and I have enjoyed every minute I’ve stayed behind the microphone, being a part of your everyday life and keeping you informed of every single thing that happened in New Pegasus and around it. Before that, I was a reporter for this very station, and I was tasked to cover many of the major events that took place in our City... and frankly, I feel really honored to have been able to be a major witness to the transformation this patch of land has suffered in the last eight years. For all that, for the moments of true camaraderie, for the good and the bad times, for all that I have learnt and enjoyed... thank you.*

*Now, I have one last message from our City Council to you, my precious listeners. Our leaders want us to resist, they need us to fight for time while they come up with a solution to this moment of suffering and anguish. Roboponies have been deployed at the walls to hold the invaders back as long as possible, but once that line of defence has been breached, it will be our turn to defend each home and each street from the enemy forces. Keep calm and have faith, since there is a plan already in motion, and according to the members of the Council, once it comes together, our safety will be guaranteed, so hold on tight!*

*Well, mares and gentlecolts, the time for one final goodbye is coming close, and I feel sad to be forced to abandon my place by the microphone. This is my world, and it will be my world wherever I go, so I will feel a little alien as long as I’m not doing this... but still, as long as there is life, there is hope, and I hope that someday, when all this madness is over, I will be able to return to my place in a radio station. Now, before we leave, we want to give our leaders a little tribute, especially dedicated to Farsight. Despite all their flaws, the last years of New Pegasus have been a true golden age, and this station would like to thank them for all their work. Here’s a little bit of Swinging Voice for you, and remember, this has been New Pegasus Radio, and I am your host, Miss New Pegasus, speaking directly to your hearts... Goodbye.”*

It’s closed. I stand before the cog-shaped gate with a large 188 painted on it, in a stark parallelism to that fateful day in which I was cast out by the Overmare. I can see myself lying on the sewer floor, crying in desperation, shaken and totally out of my mind... Now, the only thing that is to see is the large gaping hole that will lead the ponies out of New Pegasus and into freedom... if I manage to pull the final string of my

plan. I know what is to come, I know what I have to do... and yet, I feel nervous. Why should I, anyway? I have welcomed death as part of my life, and I have understood that my sacrifice is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of those I care for. Still, there is something inside me that hasn't found rest. I suppose it's my instinct of survival, that keeps begging for a second chance. Whenever I feel that urge, though, I just shake my head and convince myself that there is no other way.

I take a last look at the Stable gate and walk out of the tunnel and into the City once again. As I return to the Strip, the memories of the day of my forced entrance to this world assault me once again. My mind plays tricks on me, and I get glimpses of faded ponies that strut up and down the avenue as I clumsily walk around with no clear destination. The lights of the Casinos cast eerie shadows on the floor, fake ponies that dance to a hidden tune, while all that can be heard in the air is the explosions of the heavy cannons of the NER artillery, that has begun pounding the southern area of the City.

I pluck the earbloom of my PipBuck into my ear and switch the radio on, looking for something to be my companion during these last minutes. Static buzzes and tweets as I search through the waves, until I find the frequency of New Pegasus Radio and hear the last words of the reporter mare, giving way to Swinging Voice with one of his greatest hits. I always liked that crooner, and I went to many of his shows while he acted on the Horseshoe. I wonder where he will be now... did all this catch him in New Pegasus, or is the Molerat Pack away? Anyway, I cast those questions aside and listen to the powerful voice of the singer.

*“And now, the end is near, and so I face the final curtain...”*

How adequate. I smile and keep walking down the Strip, wandering around with no clear idea of where to go next. I know what I have to do, but I simply don't feel like it. The roboponies on the walls seem to be resisting quite well, so I don't have the urge to finish the job quickly. Like you, Swinging Voice, I am facing my final curtain. It's funny to hear a song that gets to you in the very deep, as if it had been written with this particular moment in mind. It's not the first time I hear it, but this one is different. This one has a meaning.

I get to the old Library where I first met Tracker, while in my getaway from those horrible security ponies. It's still there, still defying the grandeur of the Casinos with its solemn massiveness, being one last resort of culture and conservation within the wild Wasteland... but now, it's empty. Devoid of life and of content, as all the books have been moved away in an exercise of foresight. Good old Tracker did love all those pieces of paper. The only thing that remained was the old, wartime poster of the blindfolded pony. “Ignorance kills”, it says... Well, it does, but excessive knowledge gets you into trouble as well. Swinging Voice keeps ringing in my ear, making me shiver with each clearly directed word.

*“My friend, I'll say it clear, I'll state my case, of which I'm certain...”*

Yes, my case... my rise and fall, my glory and punishment. I am quite certain of it too. I don't regret any of my actions, but I understand that I made mistakes. I chose according to what I thought it was best, and sometimes my impressions were correct, and sometimes they were misguided. In the very end, looking at where I started and where I am right now, I can't say I did wrong... I have improved my life and those of many ponies around me. I've met kind souls and loving hearts, I've made friends and enemies, but most importantly, I have been myself all along, true to my heart and mind.

I return to the Strip, guided by my absent mind, while the voice of the crooner soothes my soul. I walk and walk, but I don't know what drives my hooves... it has to do with my memory, that's for certain, because I find myself looking at the dull building of the NPPD. My mind flies back to that day where I was thrown in the cell, broken and desperate, about to be cast out into the Wasteland... or so I thought. There I met Brass Badge... one good pony indeed. He will surely be doing well in the Caravan, as he's a hard and tough individual... but he has a golden heart. He explained the whole situation to me and made me understand what my cards were. To be a nopony, he showed great respect and care.

*“I've lived, a life that's full... I travelled each and every highway...”*

Is that song actually inspired by me? I can't help laughing as I realize how strongly Swinging Voice's lyrics match my experience. My life has been full and thrilling, even if it has actually lasted eight years, and I have travelled a lot, without a single doubt. I've been to the Wasteland, to the radiated swamps of Neighborleans,

I've seen the present ruin and the past glory... I've flown over the clouds and into the raging storms of the Divide. I've fought pegasi on airships, and I have battled from the dark to rise as the dominant power in New Pegasus. If that can't be considered a full life, well, what can?

As I keep drifting through the ghostly city, I cross Union Square, but my mind pictures the tall gates and walls that once separated New Pegasus from the uncivilized Freedom Field... my first true home and my baptism of fire. It's not there anymore, but I can still see the crackled tarmac, the broken glass on the floor, the burning barrels and the decaying buildings, no matter if all that has been fixed and continues seamlessly the bright and elegant looks of the Strip. There's no more of that macabre dance of self-preservation, no more armored thugs in the street offering protection to the newcomers, no more mares selling their bodies for a plate of food, but there will be no way those images disappear from my mind. Such was the world I grew in, and those circumstances were the ones that turned me into what I am now.

*"And more, much more than this, I did it my way..."*

My way... yeah, I guess that after all, I did things my way. I am starting to think that all my life since I was cast out of the Stable could be symbolized by that song. I did many things in my life, and some of them were forced by circumstances; but most of my actions followed what my mind told me. I tried not to bow down to nopony, except when it was necessary to keep breathing one day longer. I have fought to be independent, and frankly, that's the way I like it. No matter how attached I have become to my friends, I have always done things because I wanted to. Call me egotistic, that's what I am.

My hooves take me to the Old Pegasus Fort. It's still there, it's thick and tall walls defying the flow of time... although they will soon be no more, if I manage to take my plan to fruition. I walk inside, remembering how I woke up there after having fainted due to sheer hunger. The inside of the large ruin is now empty, with no tents or equipment left behind. Mixer and his crew have done a fine job scuttling all the material and sending it either to the Caravan or to the Stable. That ghoul has always been one fine individual... witty and charming, despite his condition, and one great physician.

As I walk around the sandy floor, I remember Goldie. I can't believe how well she hid her machiavellian self, disguised under a thick layer of goodwill and community work. The first time I met her I thought she was a true angel, somepony that could be regarded as a role model... I was truly mistaken, and her treason cost me very much... Well, now that I think of it, it was no real treason. She and I had nothing in common, and once I knew too much, I became a nuisance that had to be taken care of. I guess I would have done the same. Still, I lost Stuka because of her.

*"Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention..."*

Once again, the song brings a smile to my face. Indeed, I have had very few regrets in my life. I never regretted having forced my expellment from the Stable, as it opened my life to a greater world in which I have managed to thrive. Each and every one of my moves has been carefully planned and analyzed, and if the results haven't been the ones I expected, I have always been able to blame the world around me. After all, there are many things that I simply haven't been able to control.

Things like the ones that once took me to Trader Plaza, where I stand now. Nothing has changed in the last years... the traders never wanted to build a proper marketplace, and they felt comfortable in their little world of shacks and stalls. While I ruled over New Pegasus, I offered them a better place to do business in the City, and yet they turned it down. I suppose that they were Wastelanders all along, and that they kept wanting to do business in a Wastelander fashion. Now, the Plaza was just an empty square of brick, with nothing on it. The Republic had successfully blockaded the caravans when they turned on us, so the remaining traders just left the City before it was too late.

I remember that mare that was my neighbor when I first tried luck as a scavenger-trader. Sunberry Grass, if I recall correctly... she was a fine mare, hardworking and honest, traits that are difficult to find in the Wasteland. I recall that time when I had to find a Water Talisman for Dee and her crew... she wanted me to share it with the NER and their Communal Farms project. Did those farms ever exist, anyway? She felt really disappointed... and I realized that you can't just please everypony, which means that every decision implies a cost. One just needs to find the proper benefit to outweigh the costs.

*“I did, what I had to do, and saw it through, without exemption...”*

I chose and I acted, indeed. It was the only way to progress, and so I did with all my might. There was only one direction for me in the gutters of Freedom Field, and that was up. I knew that then, and I keep believing that now. No matter how far my assignments took me, I returned from them better and stronger, and I even got to meet new ponies that would clearly mark my life from there on.

Rose was a clear example. We’ve lived a lot together, and we have both suffered greatly in the process. It was my fault that Rose got tainted by the evil spirit of Stable 173, the despicable Lavender, but somehow, she won that battle. I feared for her every day of our existence, thinking that the poor filly would break down under the pressure of that murderous entity, but she proved to be stronger... and wiser. Instead of fighting Lavender, Rose welcomed her into her mind. They both fused and became one, a more powerful and mature Desert Rose.

Now, she’s in that Stable, acting as an Overmare. I can’t think of anypony more prepared to lead and enact justice than her. Even her Cutie Mark reflects that! I always shed a tear when I think about her... she’s my pride and joy, the best that I have crafted over the years. Better than my lead over New Pegasus, better than the transformation of Freedom Field... even better than my own life. She has shown me that there is hope in the Wasteland. Hope for a brighter tomorrow, no matter how dark the night may be.

I realize that I have walked to the door of the Four Little Diamonds, right in front of the Tesla Bar... two sides of the same coin, two individuals that marked my life and at the same time scarred it. Saddle and Ampera... they were both good ponies. He was a bit harsh and obtuse, but I realized that there was more to him than what showed. He had principles, even if he lacked the bravery to let them show, and that cowardice made him bow down to whoever could guarantee his position of power. It was sad to see him kneel, but I do believe he redeemed himself in death. Ampera, on the other hoof, was still a bleeding wound in my soul. I liked the old Ranger, her wits and her strong discipline. She was intelligent, firm and brave, and she was by my side in my moment of weakness. Without her help, I would have been a cripple... and yet, I was forced to kill her because of her betrayal.

*“I planned each charted course, each careful step along the highway, and more, much more than this, I did it my way...”*

Yes, I did plan each step carefully. Once again, I feel like Swinging Voice is depicting my life with his words, as if he had been seeing the world through my own two eyes. It is funny, and at the same time, it is starting to get a bit odd. However, I can’t avoid admitting that plans and schemes have been a central part of my life. I have always taken pride on being one step ahead of the rest of the world, since that has been what has given me the edge over the rest of my competitors. The only reason for my success has been that I have anticipated the other ponies’ moves... that, and having had good companions beside me.

Nadyr has been one of those. More than a companion, it has been a brother to me. Always there, always loyal, even if he could get a bit sidetracked by his eternal desire for money and power. I don’t doubt that he has lived a very hard life, probably much tougher than mine, and yet, he has never faltered. Always smiling, always cheerful, he has supported me in each and every endeavour I have embarked in. Now, wherever he might be, I’m sure that he will be keeping his group in a good mood, with the occasional joke or two.

I walk into the Music School, now empty and dark, and as I tread into the Music Hall, I can’t help remembering how much my life depended on this place. Dee and Metronome, Celestia rest her soul, were my patrons and my friends, as I fought for a place in the City of New Pegasus. They were both hard and tough, but Dee has always been a bit motherly to me. Somehow, I believe that we managed to connect. I liked her noble approach to being a gang leader, and I think she enjoyed watching me build complicated schemes that benefited both her and me.

Swinging Voice begins to roar in my earbloom, and I can’t help to shiver thinking of his great shows in the Auditorium. Even if standing in the small Hall, I picture him singing to the top of his voice on stage.

*“Yes there were times, I’m sure you knew, when I bit off, more than I could chew... but through it all, when there was doubt, I ate it up, and spit it out... I faced it all, and I stood tall, and did it my way!”*

I hear myself singing as well, even if my voice can't even imagine being close to that of the crooner. Tears have flowed out of my eyes, and I think I'm starting to get emotional with the song. There were many times in my life in which I found myself in a tight spot, but I can say with pride that I never backed down. I took the challenges head on, and fought for supremacy with all the weapons at my disposal. No matter how large the foe, I never surrendered, and I'm not going to do that now. No matter how loud the cannons may ring, no matter how close those barbarians of the Tsar may be, I shall overcome... New Pegasus shall overcome.

I have exited the Music School and have made my way back into New Pegasus... just to find myself looking at the Obelisk of Union Square. Those who fell for the growth of our City, that's what it was meant to symbolize, but in the very deep, I know it has a completely different meaning... It's a tribute to the one that showed me true love and care in the Wasteland for the first time, even if we were different species. Stuka's effigy stood there, on top of the monument, looking at Freedom Field with a kind face. That's how I wanted her to be shown to the world, as a loving soul.

I still miss her, even if I have found Avro. I guess that, if she had been there, things would have been different. I can say she was a sort of an anchor for me, as she kept me from getting too euphoric or too depressed. She was my soulmate, and I think she would have understood my attraction towards the pegasus. We understood each other, the two of us being outcasts from where we belonged, having to rebuild our lives in an alien environment. However, we had each other to lean on, and that was what kept us moving on. Her loss was dramatic, but at the same time, it was the last thing I needed to realize what my ultimate goal was. I owe her much... more than I will ever be able to repay.

*"I've loved, I've laughed and cried, I've had my fill, my share of losing... and now, as tears subside, I find it all so amusing... To think, I did all that, and may I say, not in a shy way... oh no, oh no not me, I did it my way..."*

I'm back on the Strip, walking along the bright lights of the Casinos, remembering the days in which I fought to turn Full House and the Ferraturas against each other. Then, suddenly, everything came crashing down in a maelstrom of chaos... moment in which I stepped up and took over the City. It was my finest hour, my boldest move... and probably, the moment in which I was closer to losing it all. I just went all in on a no-limit table, and left everything to the cards. Lady Luck was kind to me that day, the same way that it has been unkind lately.

Still, these last eight years have been good, I suppose. I've realized my dreams of power and glory, and many ponies regard me as a good ruler and a worthy individual. There are friends that have stayed loyal to me from start to finish, and I have found love two times, even if the last one was a bit tainted. Yes, Avro has been my angel, my sun and moon, my ecstasy and my pathway to destruction.

She came to me with lies and seduction, and for once in my life, I failed to see her true intentions... she drove me to a point of no return and forced me to fight the Red Front, prompting New Pegasus into a war with the Republic. Despite all that, I still loved her. I've realized that love goes beyond logic, since there's no explanation for what I feel for her; even if I know that she's to blame for all my strife. Besides, she's shown true remorse and anguish for her actions... for a professional liar, I think that's some strong honesty. Not to forget that she's going to make me a father... even if I will never get to see my own foal.

I walk into the Spire elevator with the last words of Swinging Voice ringing in my earbloom, the great finale of the song that has in some way symbolize my life, and that will also picture the end to it. I don't hide my feelings anymore, for I am alone... I sing to the top of my musicless voice and let the tears fall free, since I have much to live for... but I have to go.

*"For what is a buck, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught... to say the things he truly feels, and not the words of one who kneels... the record shows, I took the blows... and did it MY WAY!"*

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The red button is there, taunting me to push it. I will have to do it sooner or later, but I want to get things sorted out first. There will be many loose ends after I leave this world, and other ponies will have to tie them together... not with the best intentions, probably. The reason for which I have been narrating my life from the

very day I was forced out of the Stable is pretty simple, as anypony can imagine. My friends are hidden, while my enemies roam the world and have power. I don't doubt that I will be regarded as a monster when all this ends, so I have to ensure that my tale is told properly.

This PipBuck, this loyal companion over the years, will be spared my destruction, as a witness of my life and the things that went on around me. I will store it someplace safe and I know that one day, these memories will be uncovered by somepony. I just hope that whoever does the discovery manages to divulge it to the world. I'll go to the Vault that Pet told me to store the PipBuck, but first, there is something I must leave behind for that individual that I love even before its existence.

*My dearest son... or daughter.*

*You and I will never get to meet, but I am sure that you will hear my name many times along your life, the name of Farsight. There will be many stories told about me, most of them bad and harmful, speaking about how my greed and selfishness destroyed a beautiful city... and they will be right, up to a point.*

*I've made a lot of things in my life, and I have unmade many others. I was no hero, and I don't want to see me as such... the sooner you realize that all of us have the same weaknesses and flaws, the better your life will be. I have fought to give you a brighter future, and I know that your mother and those around you, like your Aunt Rose and your Uncle Nadyr will be there to guide you in your upcoming life.*

*The only thing I pray for is a long and prosperous life for you. Be strong, be free and be true to your own self. That's the only way to find peace of mind and real happiness. Make friends and stay loyal to them, but don't hesitate to shun those who try to use you. Be your own mind's greatest ally, and listen to her advice. Respect and honor those who guide you, and you will be shown the same respect and honor.*

*You will always be in my mind.*

That's all that had to be said, I guess. I just have to store the PipBuck and push the big red button that will end all this. I order the roboponies to open the gates and retreat to the Horseshoe while I descend into the bowels of the Casino, into the small vault in which I will hide the PipBuck. After all, the more enemies I take with me, the better the result.

The utility room is small and ugly, but it seems robust enough to endure what is coming. There is nothing more than a vault and a terminal that governs it. I could store the device and run away, but I guess I should leave a little note explaining the meaning of the contents, just to make my intentions clear. I walk to the computer and begin typing.

*Congratulations. If you're reading this, then you have no doubt been able to breach the security of this bunker. I can only assume you are no raider and are definitely interested in what I've got to say. Probably because you're looking for answers to what happened to New Pegasus, and no doubt you know my role in its destruction. All the details are in the PipBuck that lies now inside the safe. Basically, it's a memory storage device with all my life in it.*

*There are some things you must know first, though. I know I'm looked upon with disgust, as the evil traitor that selfishly abandoned his friends after having used them for his own devices. That is no lie. I know I was no role model. Actually, many times I look back at my life in shame and regret. Don't get me wrong, though. I don't regret any of my actions. I regret not having enjoyed the little moments of true happiness I had in this soulless world we live in.*

*That doesn't matter anymore, since I'm already dead and you're looking at a screen inside a rad-proof vault under the ruins of what once was a beacon of light in the middle of the Wasteland. My feelings won't bring back the dead, won't avenge the injustice. However, I needed to tell my story, I needed to keep a record of what I went through in this world. I wasn't always like the pony the world says I was. I once was a peaceful colt with a bright future in the peace of a Stable. Life is a harsh mistress, though, and she taught me a great lesson. Don't fight the power. And you know what? I rebelled. I fought the power with all my might, until I became the power; then others fought me.*

*And even if the former is true, the lesson of my life is another. Trust nopony, because everypony lies. Everypony is selfish in the Wasteland. Everypony is cruel. Everypony is disloyal. Everypony is dishonest.*

*Keep your friends close, and your foes closer.*

*However, I think I'm getting carried away with philosophy, which isn't my intent at all. As I've said, I'm here to tell a story, the story of my life, and of how I came to be the leader of New Pegasus, just to end up destroying it. Take a look at my PipBuck and you'll see what I have to say.*

*Farsight.*

I let go one last sigh and open the Vault. These are my last words before I unlatch the PipBuck from my forehoof and return to the top of the Spire, to unleash the wrath of the Enola, so I should make them count...

“Rose, Nadyr, Avro, my foal... I will always be with you.”

**END OF ACT V**

## *Epilogue: Both Sides Of The Story*

*Presidential Palace of the New Equestrian Republic, New Canterlot. One day after the explosion.*

The secretary rushed into the President's Office, carrying a folder in her saddlebag, while mumbling something about 'defeat' and 'crushed'. Her face showed worries and fear, but one could not tell if she felt that because of the contents of the folder or because of the pony she was about to confront.

"Miss President!" She cried.

"What is it?" Praline took a puff of her cigar and groaned. "Why do you look so... anxious?"

"It's the last report..."

"What last report? Speak up!"

"The frontline... in Neighvada..." The secretary tried to catch her breath. "There's a problem... Harpsong..."

"Calm down, will you!" Praline facehoofed. "I need you to speak clearly, or I won't understand you! Take a moment to breathe if you need it!"

The secretary nodded and gasped for air, while Praline fumbled with the cigar and waited with a face of expectation and displeasement. Somehow, she had the feeling that there were no good news on the horizon.

"Miss President, the Neighvada Army has been..."

"Defeated?"

"Decimated. The death toll grows to the 85% of the entire Army!"

"WHAT?" Praline roared, and the cigar fell to the table. "How on Equestria could that have happened? Was it the Tsar's doing?"

"No, Miss President. According to Stonetree's report, it was Farsight."

"Farsight? What did that son of a bitch do this time?"

"He blew up the entire city, ma'am. Apparently, he had a balefire bomb."

"Luna damn his soul!" Praline roared and stomped the floor. "What happened exactly?"

"According to the last transmissions we managed to record, the City Gates opened, and once the troops were inside, he pulled the trigger. Vice-President Heartstrings was leading the assault..."

"Harpsong..." Praline mumbled. "Dammit. What about Stonetree?"

"He saw the bluff through, and he retreated his unit. They were the only ones that survived the blast."

"Shit." Praline sighed and went silent.

"W-what should we do, President? Should we send reinforcements?"

"No way." Praline shook her head. "Retreat all our forces to Divide Pass, and once the radiation has settled, begin sending recon squads to find out what really happened in New Pegasus."

"What should we tell the population?"

"Put all the blame on Farsight. Have the History books picture him as a traitor and an evil tyrant. We need to justify our actions in Neighvada... and I will never admit defeat against a no-good mobster. The Republic demands it!"

"For the Republic, President!" The secretary saluted.

"For the Republic..."

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*Single Pegasus Project Tower. Two hours after the explosion.*

The screen showed nothing but radiation-induced static, as the blast from the Enola had blocked all the comms systems in the Divide. The only eye into Neighvada had been clouded, and Littlepip knew exactly what it meant... her hopes had been dashed.

"I guess I misjudged you, Farsight. You were in deeper trouble than what I imagined... but I never expected you to take out the population of New Pegasus with you."

"Hello? Who is that?" A voice called from the other end of the line.

"What? I thought the camera was down."

"We have no image, but we can hear you... and I guess you can too."

"I can, yes. Who am I speaking to?"

"My name is Petlyakov... I was Farsight's friend, and trust me, he didn't do what you think he has done."

"But New Pegasus..."

"Yes, it is no more. However, the population has been secured."

"Really? How?"

"A convenient Stable."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I checked it myself, ma'am. It will work, have faith in Farsight."

"Faith... yes, that's all that remains now..."

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*The Tsar's Palace, Quebeck. Two weeks after the explosion.*

"We have news from Neighvada, your Majesty."

The Tsar moved on his throne and showed a face of eager interest. After having been bored to death by a self-appointed Court Minstrel, he needed to give his mind enough food to chug the routine of the daily life as a Wasteland ruler. His old, battle-hardened body needed action to be kept in good state, and since he was too important to risk his hide in battle, he awaited each after-action report with true enthusiasm.

"Fine, fine. About time, anyway." The Tsar smiled. "What does Nevski tell us today?"

"Nevski is dead, your Majesty?"

"Really? How did that happen?"

"Well, apparently he messed with some local chieftain."

"Could that be the renowned Farsight he has mentioned in prior reports?"

"Yes, your Excellence."

"I see... and what did that Farsight pony do to defeat Nevski? As far as I know, his military forces were close to none."

"It seems that he... blew the entire city up."

"He did that?" The Tsar laughed. "That's simply incredible. That Farsight is a master of the unexpected."

"Was, your Highness."

"Was?"

"He committed suicide. With the bomb."

“Did he?” The Tsar clapped. “Better dead than defeated. I like his attitude! He should be regarded as a hero! I want our chronicles to glorify his name!”

“Certainly, your Majesty. What should we do with Neighvada?”

“Forget about it.” The Tsar frowned. “If that Farsight has been capable of destroying all he had to preserve his freedom, I don’t want to face the wrath of his followers. We have other ways to expand before returning to Neighvada. Nevski made a mistake, and I am not going to repeat it.”

“Of course, your Majesty. Of course...”

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### *Stable 188 Clinic*

“Easy now, Avro, breathe steadily.” Mixer mumbled.

“Ugh...” Avro moaned. “It... it hurts...”

“I know, dear, but it will be over soon. It’s coming fast!” Mixer smiled.

“Stay strong, Avro, we’re here with you.” Rose whispered.

“Uuuugh...” Avro huffed.

“Push, Avro.” Mixer said calmly. “Slowly and steadily, but don’t falter. Push!”

“Urrgh... aaaagh!” Avro cried and panted, sweating profusely.

“You’re doing fine, Avro!” Rose cheered. “It’s coming, I can see it! Just a bit more!”

“That’s it, one final push, darling, and it will be over!” Mixer yelled, trying to give the pegasus one last hurrah.

“EEEYAAAARGH!” Avro wailed to the top of her voice, while tears rolled down her cheeks. Suddenly, the cries of a foal flooded the steel-walled room.

“Congratulations, Avro.” Mixer smiled. “It’s a perfectly healthy unicorn colt.”

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### *Studio of DJ PON-3, Tenpony Tower, Manhattan. Six years after the explosion.*

The soldier came out of nowhere, looking worried and searching everywhere for something nopony else could see. He carried a large bag with the symbol of the NER Army, and he showed the scars of a battle-hardened pony, put to a test in the toughest possible environments. It was odd to see such individuals walking into a place like Tenpony Tower, but ever since the City began to return to its original state, things had become a tad less paranoid.

“Hello.” Homage smiled and grabbed the strange soldier. She saw that he was scared and took him to a nearby room, where they could speak without being bothered. “How can I help you?”

“I would like to speak to the DJ.” He groaned. “The one that told the tales of the Light Bringer.”

“That... will not be possible.” Homage grinned. “However, I can act as a messenger. Would you please tell me your name?”

“I am Sunlight Forger, of the NER Army... I would like to stay anonymous, though.”

“Of course, I understand that. What did you want to tell DJ PON-3?”

“I have... information about what happened in New Pegasus six years ago.”

“Really?” Homage flinched. “What kind of information?”

“A direct confession.”

“That’s impossible. Farsight died on that explosion.”

“I found a PipBuck with his memoirs. Before giving it to my commanding officer, I copied the contents to these holotapes.” Forger picked a pack of five tapes out of the bag. “I realized that the truth had to be told... somehow.”

“But this...”

“This will get me killed, I know... but I can’t sleep at night, knowing that the official version is a blatant lie. Please, help me spread the word. DJ PON-3 did that with the Light Bringer... and I believe Farsight deserves that as well.”

“Of course.” Homage nodded. “I’ll send this to the DJ right away.”

## *Afterword: Going Home*

“So... why don't you want to go?”

“I told you, it might be dangerous. Besides, that place brings back memories that still hurt a bit. I will visit the ruins eventually, my dear, but I need time to get over it.”

“But Auntie Rose, Atreid and Harko are constantly telling me that we should go and see the ruins of New Pegasus together!”

“Atreid and Harko are both grown up ponies now... They can do as they wish, and besides, they're just like their father.”

“Brave?”

“Reckless and a bit nuts.” Rose laughed calmly.

“But I want to go!”

“And you will go!” Pet entered the room and patted the young colt on his head. “You've got your Cutie Mark, and I promise that I'll take you to the ruins. Not today, though... you need to go to school.”

“But I don't like school, Uncle Pet. I'm too smart for that, I always know the right answer!”

“Of course you do. You're just like your father.” Pet smiled. “Now get a move on, young one!”

“Fine...” The colt grumbled. “Bye, Auntie Rose! Bye, Uncle Pet!”

He waved and dashed out of the room, leaving Pet and Rose alone. The pegasus moved and kissed the mare, who smiled and caressed him in return. Ever since she had arrived at their new home, she had shown her feelings towards Petlyakov overtly, and true love had bloomed out of the couple.

“That kid is terrible.” Rose shook her head.

“He's called Free Sight for a reason, Rose.” Pet smiled.

“I think Avro had a moment of clairvoyance when she named him.” Rose laughed. “What worries me is something else, though.”

“What is it, honey?”

“His Cutie Mark. Have you seen it?”

“Yes, a banner with the red eye of his father and a sword.”

“What do you think it will mean?”

“Frankly, I don't know. I guess he will follow his father's ways.”

“But what about the sword?”

“It might not mean anything, Rosie. My Cutie Mark has a dagger on it too, and I'm no killer.”

“But you were a soldier.”

“An engineer, honey. I never fought a single fight.”

“Yes, but...”

“Take it easy, Rose! He's just a colt right now, and I can understand that he wants to learn about his past. Atreid and Harko go there every now and then, and so do Dee and Nadyr. All of us need to pay honors to our past.”

“Yes, but... I don't know if that's the best idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the rumours that run around in the Wasteland... voices of a lone wanderer, a blue unicorn with a white mane, covered in bandages, walking around in the desert... looking from a distance. Could it be him?”

“Those are nothing more than stupid ramblings of drunken caravaners. You know that Farsight is dead, Rose. Nothing could survive an explosion like the one of the Enola... not to mention the radiation.”

“But what if he had another ace up his sleeve?”

“Rose, he’s dead. My crew has searched far and wide for proof of his survival, even Avro has, but we have found nothing more than the large mark of the explosion. It’s simply impossible, darling.”

“You can’t prove that, Pet. Imagine what would happen if Free Sight met his father in such a condition!”

“As long as he wasn’t nuts, I wouldn’t mind.” Pet laughed.

“Cut it out, Pet!” Rose hit the pegasus with her hoof.

“All right, have it your way.” Pet shrugged. “We’ll keep searching for that mysterious wanderer. However, you should give Free Sight the chance to make up with his past. He deserves it.”

“Fine, fine... just go.”

Pet smiled and trotted out of the room, leaving Rose alone with her thoughts. It had been almost seven years since they had arrived at Fortune’s Loss, and the community had grown to be a pretty little town. Every pony from New Pegasus had relocated without much trouble, and things were starting to look up for them, now that the Republic and the Tsardom had left Neighvada out of their plans. She walked out into the street and trotted towards the town entrance, where a large stone statue of a pony stood welcoming the visitor. It was a young unicorn stallion, dressed in a sharp suit and wearing a PipBuck on his forehoof. He looked at the newcomers with a confident and defiant face, proving that he was the one to follow, the one to believe in... the one that gave his life for them.

“Thank you, Farsight.” Rose let a tear roll down her cheek. “Wherever you are.”

“Rose!” The voice of a mare rang from the skies. Such an uncanny entrance... it had to be Avro. Rose looked up to see the pegasus descending in circles to where she was standing.

“Hello, Avro. How are you?”

“Fine, thanks, Rose.” She smiled. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t pick up Free Sight before. I guess you managed to convince him to go to school, didn’t you?”

“Pet did, actually.” Rose laughed. “Free Sight keeps insisting on visiting the ruins of New Pegasus.”

“He can be as stubborn as his father.” Avro smiled sadly, looking at the statue. “He will have to go someday, though. He deserves that.”

“You’re the second pony who tells me that, the first one being Pet.”

“Pet and I think alike in many things.” The pegasus shrugged.

“Avro... what do you think about Free Sight’s Cutie Mark? It worries me.”

“Why?” Avro asked. “Because of the sword?”

“Yes.” Rose mumbled. “I care a lot about him, and I don’t want him to go on some loony crusade. That’s why I try to keep him at a safe distance of his past.”

“Rose, don’t worry so much about it. Free Sight will be fine, with all of us watching.”

“We have our lives to live, Avro.”

“Yes, but my life is his, Rose.” Avro smiled. “I will be with him, protecting him when he needs it, helping him when he asks for it, and caring for him until my last breath. You’ll have foals one day, and you will understand.”

“Of course.” Rose nodded slowly. “Maybe I’m just... worrying too much.”

“Yes, but anyway, I can’t thank you enough.” Avro smiled. “I need to go to work, Rose.”

“One more thing before you leave, Avro... what about the rumours?”

“What rumours?”

“Those of the lone wanderer... the burnt blue stallion.”

“You think it can be Farsight?” Avro sighed. “I don’t know, Rose. I’ve been searching for him almost everyday since I first heard the story, but honestly, I think it’s a legend... like the one of the Light Bringer, you know? Virtuous ponies that get elevated into almost mythical beings. After the blow he delivered to the NER and the Tsar, I am certain that the inhabitants of Neighvada see him as a spirit that defends the Territory. The Light Bringer sacrificed herself for the rest of the world... or so it says in the book.”

“I read it, Avro.” Rose smiled. “What would Farsight’s virtue be, then?”

“I don’t know, you’re the one that knew him better.” Avro smiled.

“Reason.”

“What?”

“I said that I suppose that Farsight’s virtue would have to be reason. He always knew what to do and why to do it... and that was why he was never defeated.”

“Yes...” Avro smiled sadly. “But look at the cost he had to incur.”

“He would have said that it was a calculated risk.” Rose laughed.

“That would have been typical of him.” Avro laughed as well. “Anyway, Rose, I must be going now. See you later!”

“Later, Avro.” Rose sighed and saw the pegasus fly away.

After Avro disappeared on the horizon, Rose turned around and took one last look at the billboard that had been built at the entrance of the village. The words were clearly readable from a distance.

“WELCOME TO FARSIGHTVILLE”

**THE END**