

# Equestria War Z

## An Oral History of the Zombie Pony War

By CoffeeGrunt



# Table of Contents:

Introduction		3
Case File One	Nurse Redheart	5
Case File Two	Captain Rainbow Dash	10
Case File Three	Twilight Sparkle	15
Case File Four	Trot Wainier	22
Case File Five	Major Spitfire	28

# Introduction

"This is Fleet Street coming to you live from the Manehattan Royal Sisters' Hospital, where outbreaks of a new disease are causing concerns..."

"...Indications that the infected ponies are in fact incapable of any higher-brain function, or any real co-ordinated movement..."

"...The Royal Sisters have refused any comments, but three days after the quarantine breach in the Royal Sisters' Hospital, military forces have been seen deploying to the Manehattan streets, an indicator of the severity of the outbreak..."

"...Snapshot? Snapshot, is it bucking rol - This is Fleet Street coming to you live from the centre of the storm in Manehattan Central Park, where two weeks after the first case of the disease, the infection has now spread out of control, with evacuees escaping via pegasus...Snapshot, are those...? Oh buck! They're here! This is Fleet Street, signing off on the Manehattan outbreak, where the infected have breached military defenses. Let's get the buck outta here!"

=====

It was long. It was bloody. It was unlike anything ponykind had faced before. Ponies that had conquered Ursas and Manticores trembled like newborn foals, because the monsters were ponies this time. Ponies they knew. Sometimes, even their best friends and loved ones. A million HollyHoof movies chronicled it, and because of that, nopony believed it. Ignorance was the smokscreen that let it get so far...we barely made it back from the brink.

I suppose starting out with the philosophical and the theatrics is odd, for a damage report. My name is Quill Stroke. The United Equestrian Democracy asked me to compile a report, interviewing ponies to discover death counts, economic damage, how much repairs would cost. More and more, I gravitated towards the stories the ponies told me. Some fearful, others boasting with pride. My employers told me my report was worthless, they wanted numbers and facts, not some shell-shocked pony's life story. I

told them, that the damage to ponykind was in the ponies it left behind, not the ones it killed. That, in order to prevent this being labelled as another natural disaster...to prevent it ever reoccurring, we must take the ponies' stories as our reports.

I was shouted out of the office, ridiculed and mockingly told to see a publisher. So I did. One such publisher being kind enough to publish my writings as this series of pamphlets; a chronicle of the ponies lost, and ponies they left behind. This is my story of the great terror ponykind was almost destroyed by, through the eyes of the ponies who witnessed it. Theatrics call it the Howling Hunger. Religious, the Rapture. The bureaucrats and politicians applied their own cold, calculated label to the event; Equestria War Z. As such, this is how this work shall be titled, so that both the story told by the UED, and the story told by the survivors, will be remembered.

What follows is as many stories as I could find, in what remains of the once-beautiful land of Equestria.

# Case File One

## Nurse Redheart

Nurse Redheart has taken me to the Manehattan Hospital, where the infection began. So many years after Victory Equestria day, this place is merely a monument to a battle that still rages in some parts of the world to this day. The bodies and gore have long been cleared, the walls are sterile, but coated in the grime of simple neglect, the building having been abandoned for the five years since the outbreak began.

Despite the lack of gore, or other clues to this building's horrifying place in the events that unfolded here, much is still apparent. IV stands lay scattered on the floor, hospital beds are overturned. We pass through a pair of fire doors, the glass shattered, and the door itself hanging off its hinges. The room we enter is familiar to anypony who watched the news while it still broadcasted. It is the ward of Patient Zero.

The bed still stands, though the rest of the room is trashed beyond recognition. Graffiti art is strewn across the walls, one such piece citing "*Here is where the Princesses abandoned us.*" Many contain references to dark magic, none of which seem to faze Nurse Redheart. She perches herself on a chair besides the bed, still unwilling to touch it despite the lack of infection present after all this time.

I find a seat for myself, a bedside cabinet overturned, but ample for my needs. My trusty dictaphone is unveiled, the crutch to my lack of ability to write in shorthoof. Clearing my throat, I start the tape.

"I am here with Nurse Redheart, one of the many ponies who attempted to help and cure Patient Zero. I have one question to ask you first, Ms Redheart...why did you choose this room to have our talk?"

The Nurse seemed to be thrown by the question, giving it more thought than I had expected. Several seconds of silence pass, before she begins her reply.

"The memories have faded already...something I am grateful for. My retirement is no time to remember nightmares and demons, but in this

room, I can never forget. It's the only way I could give you my account with a clear head."

"You mentioned retirement? Forgive me for prying, but surely you are too young to retire?"

The Nurse leans in closer, and for a moment I can see her eyes, aged beyond the face that contained them. A pony that had endured the heart of the storm.

"The medical career was never a stressless one, many retire early, though not with the large paychecks the public believe we do. The...events that happened here have not treated me well. I'm making great progress with my therapist...but I could never hope to help a pony. My mind isn't what it was...retirement is my word for 'indefinite leave due to mental trauma.'"

The Nurse looks down at her hooves, tapping them together slowly. It takes me a long time to think of a reply, feeling something consolatory should be said. Thankfully, the Nurse senses my trepidation, and with a soft smile, replies for me.

"Not that I'm not happy. I'm blessed my husband also survived. In the evacuation, and the troubles after, we feared for each other...scared that we had lost each other. It wasn't until many months after. He'd been brought in from a battle with secessionists that I found him. In fact, he was brought to me to get stitches in his head. I have never squandered a day since then, my...'retirement,' as well as his, allows us to make the most of what time we have left."

"I am glad you found him in the end, I hope I can find more ponies with as happy resolutions as you have had. Though, what was it like during the infection...to be a nurse to Zero?"

"When he came in...he was already at what we now know as the late stages. Of course, we didn't know anything. I was called over from the Ponyville Infirmary, my knowledge in obscure herbal medicines and Everfree diseases made me a possible help."

"Possible...but sadly not successful, I imagine?"

The Nurse chuckles to herself, waving a hoof around the room, stopping on the only window to the outside. I notice the extreme silence from the once-

bustling district. The twittering of birds being the only noise from the outside.

"I'm sure that question need not be answered. The media blamed us, as always, but we did everything we could for Patient Zero. Antibiotics, antivirals, the best in magical healthcare, every crackpot herbal remedy and homeopathy cure under Celestia's sun. Nothing can stop it, but in our ignorance, we tried all we could. The only cure is to kill, as the hoofsoldiers used to say. Sadly, I could never breach my Hippocratic Oath like that, not while I believed there was hope."

"You say the media blame you? Why is this?"

"Oh, spinsters and journalists getting ready to sink their teeth into the next big tragedy. I honestly prefer the...patients...to those ponies. They claimed government cutbacks, lack of training, the usual stuff. I'm almost glad one of them was the second...no sorry, that's terribly bitter of me."

"I won't judge, I want the emotions from the stories, not the censored numbers and facts."

The Nurse tightened her posture, bracing herself to continue her story.

"Then I suppose...you want the story of the night the outbreak began...I can at least hope you'll be more sensitive with the story than those parasprites with the cameras."

I put on my winning smile, sure that the story to follow will fill a massive hole in my knowledge, the pivotal moment when the whole war began. "I'll try my best, ma'am."

"You seem trustworthy. Well, it was October the 13th, Patient Zero had been...turned three days ago. We attempted to pacify him, but with no luck. The blood samples we gathered were....disgusting, and unnerving to say the least."

"What was so unusual about the blood? Was there anything that could have hinted at the cause back then?"

"If there was...we would have found it. No...the blood...wasn't blood. It was a foul-smelling, black ooze. Blood that had been long-coagulated. Yet the patient was there, writhing in the shackles." She tenderly touches a hoof to the very same restraints, jerking back as though she had received a shock.

"After a few hours, I noticed the same ichor on the shackles...he had worn his coat and skin away. But it was all that journalist...that foal of a pony!"

"Was she the one that released him?"

Nurse Redheart's expression changes, wistful memories being overtaken by bitter anger. She notices the sudden sea-change in her demeanour, and with a deep breath, calms herself so she can continue.

"Yes. A Pony Rights activist...or at least, using it as a cover to get some airtime. She hadn't even gotten the third ankle shackle off when he...when he...Her scream was all we heard. That...and the noise of...Zero feeding. Security leapt on him, but he wasn't restrained...and he was so strong. Soon the other guards were nursing wounds, the journalist had been bitten in the neck. She passed quickly."

"And then the bitten were restrained too?"

The Nurse lets out a dark chuckle, a retrospective laugh at life's horrible mistakes. "We never knew that was how it worked. Our brilliant measures were bandages and bedrest. It wasn't until the guards turned - the journalist having died too quickly for it to take hold - that we understood it. Of course, it was too late then."

She appears to hesitate, the tip of her hoof stroking her chin, before lighting stroking the bed before her. "One pony caused the dominoes to fall...and we almost lost it all. The sad thing is, nopony even know where he came from, or who he was. He simply limped into the atrium, collapsing at the reception desk. I have often wondered how he came to be infected...whether there is a source we don't know of."

"How did you escape the chaos? Was there any police reaction to the outbreak?"

"I galloped...galloped in a way I haven't done since I was a filly on the Relay Team at school. I didn't stop until I was four blocks away...sights like those don't let you stop, the adrenaline pushes you as far away as possible. I remember police appeared...unarmed, not ready. Soon it became a 'riot' growing out of control. Then the city in the space of a few days, I even saw Royal Guards fighting them in Central Park when we were escaping."



"The last stand of Captain Keen Eye?"

A tip of her hoof brushes her eye, as the Nurse removes a solitary tear from the corner. " A pony I owe my life to, as well as his stallions. As the last Aircarts took off, the infected overran the military's defenses. Ten-hoof high walls, and they simply clambered on top of one-another to get over it. I feared for my life...scared of a death at the hooves of another pony, a twisted monster of a normal equine I might have passed on the street without even a hello."

A hoof is pressed to her eye in an attempt to dam the tears. I lean closer, aiming to comfort her, but she waves away the gesture. "Sorry...to be so rude...it's just...remembering these things is difficult for me to bear. Keen Eye and his stallions held the last area of land the AirCarts could land on, circling it and firing their horns into the oncoming horde. I was one of the last to leave, there was plenty of room...but he wanted to stay behind. His stallions boarded, he himself holding them back just long enough to stop them overwhelming the cart as it took off...I never saw them take him. I like to think he left this world in a fireball, rather than a slaughter."

"Thank you for your time, Nurse Redheart...I hope you continue the happiness you have regained."

"And I hope you make the right decisions with how to use my testimony. Though, I am sure you will anyway...these horror stories are more than likely ten-a-bit anyway."

"It doesn't make them any less valuable. Again, thank you."

# Case File Two

## Captain Rainbow Dash

The NightWatch control is a vibrant, bustling centre of activity. As I enter I can see ponies at terminals co-ordinating the fliers, maps adorn every available table, the whole place decked in gunmetal grey flagstones.

There's an extremely utilitarian air to the whole room, as the machinery of this vital post-war emergency service moves around me.

The pony I have been aiming to meet is standing in the centre of the room, her rainbow mane cropped short in a military crewcut, her body wrapped in a form-fitting uniform. It's a vibrant, navy blue cut across with lightning bolts down each limb. The uniform is reminiscent of pre-war aerobatic team uniforms.

The Captain doesn't acknowledge me until I am very close, standing opposite her at the table. Before us is a glimmering magigram of the nearby town of New Ponyville, each building, field and pony fleshed out in full 3-D for the captain to plan her recon teams. Tonight is like any other night, the danger of remnant Zed attacks on civilians is still all too high. Her head snaps up to meet my gaze, her eyes instantly hard and calculating for a few, tense seconds. After she sizes me up, and works out who I am, she relaxes, but only slightly. I can still see the tension in her forelegs, and her wings twitch slightly with anticipation. She appears like any other military pony, a gun loaded to fire.

"Hey, you must be the reporter?"

I cough at the title, the media not being in favour with the public nowadays.

"No, just a...researcher, trying to find out stories from the war. And I was told, that yours is the story to end all stories."

The Captain chuckles, fillyish pride beaming through. "That is, if it's the story I'm thinking of, pony."

Her hoof is raised to the portrait above us, depicting a starry sky filled with the burning smoke of buildings. A trio of pegasi are brightly realised in contrast to the shadow that the rest of the painting defers to. I could tell by

the tiny pinpricks of red amongst the shadowy mass exactly what it was meant to represent. The Battle of Old Ponyville was one of many bloody engagements, but the endeavours of Captain Dash herself had stopped it becoming yet another massacre.

“Painting like that...gives a filly a nice ego boost. Now, if you’ll come to my office, I suppose I can probably let you in on a little bit of it.”

We walk to the office, simply a side room with a desk and some chairs. We both take our seats, Captain Dash taking a relaxed pose behind her desk, while I retrieve my dictaphone once more, and start the recording.

“I am here with Ms Rainbow Dash, or should I say, Captain Rainbow Dash, though the story you’re going to tell me occurs long before you gained that title, or so I’ve heard?”

The Captain chuckles, waving a casual hoof at me. “Takes more than one heroic act to become leader of a show like this. But hey, I only have time for one of them, sorry. Makes sense to pick the one from the start.”

“Tell me about the battle, Captain. The Battle of Old Ponyville.”

“Will do Quill Stroke, and please, call me Dash.”

“Okay Dash, please, tell me as best as you remember it. Was there any clues leading up to it, any signs of what was coming?”

“Are you kidding me? There were clues all over, on the radio, on the TVs, in the newspapers and between ponies in the street! The clues were all over, but did we wanna believe ‘em? No way!”

“So, you had no knowledge of what was happening, no preparation.”

Dash leans forward, tapping her forehooves together lightly. “First I knew, I was getting woken from my cloud by the sound of homes being broken into. The came through the Everfree, even the creatures in there didn’t wanna tangle them. We were blind, couldn’t see ‘em coming, and they...there were *hundreds* of them.”

“Were you scared of the Zeds? Were you worried for your life?”

Dash chuckles once again, tapping a hoof on the table whilst shaking her head. “We were weather patrol, Quill, not military. We didn’t know a thing

about Zees or the infection. We just heard some ponies were attacking, and went to rustle them up.”

“...And when you reached the attack site?”

“Well...I don’t know what was worse...the Zees...or the ponies they’d killed. They were mangled, some were missing legs. We couldn’t tell which were the attackers or which were the victims. Then they all looked at me, *all* of them. I’d landed right onto their lap, ready to bust some rump...” She chuckles sadly, as though remembering these memories for the first time in a long time. “They all just locked onto me, and I had this little voice in my head, ‘*get the buck out, Rainbow!*’ I gunned it outta there, but Raindrop...”

I sense the tension in her words. “She...was attacked?”

“You’re a smart colt, would you call twenty Zees on one filly who barely got her cutie mark an ‘attack?’” She stifles herself with a hoof, recomposing herself. “They tore her apart, Quill. And I...I was so scared...I just froze up! Wings stiff, and I just sat on a rooftop...couldn’t stop watching...”

“You can’t blame yourself, Dash. Like you said, you were just a weather pony who didn’t know what was going on.”

“Yeh, but seeing a horde of zombie ponies shoulda kicked a fast pony like me into gear, right? But no, I just sat on that roof, hugging the thatching...just staring at them shuffling towards me, except the load that surrounded Raindrop. She stopped screaming pretty quickly...thank Celestia it was quick...but there isn’t much else to thank *her* for.”

“How did you escape, did they manage to reach you?”

Dash’s face turns reminiscent, almost dreamlike as she trotted down memory lane. “Light Showers. Ha! He was the stallion that always kicked my rump off the cloud to get my job done. Might surprise you to learn I was quite the slob back then.”

“We all start somewhere, Ms Dash. But what happened next? I’m intrigued to hear how the slob became a hero!”

“Oh, flattery will get you all the fillies, Quill, you sweet-talker. Yeh, Showers got my rump off the chopping block, no doubt about it. Twilight had received a message from the Princess just before they came, she was an

ex-student. That Twilight...she was always the militant organiser. She got the weather team together, to organise evacs to the library."

"A library? Hardly seems like an impenetrable fortress."

Dash chuckles, tapping a forehoof on the desk. "Not unless it's a hollowed out tree with solid oak - inches thick - for walls, and a powerful unicorn organising the defence of it. It had a balcony they used to use for looking at stars or some trash...turned out that balcony became our landing zone. Perfect place to drop our passengers off, and go grab summere."

"So you just picked everypony up and retreated to the library?"

"Yeh...like anything in this war was that simple. You tell me, fifty hooves in the air, smoke from burning buildings all around you, screams of the ponies below. You tell me how you tell the moaning, stumbling, injured victim from the moaning, stumbling, Zee attacker. You don't smell 'em 'til you get close! I saw weather ponies grabbing what they thought were survivors, then get ripped apart down to the ground...thing is the buckin' Zees always survived the landing where the ponies didn't, and they just crawled back for more."

I tap my chin thoughtfully, simply unable to imagine the horror of saving somepony, only to find they were yet another monster. "Did you manage to get everypony you could out?"

"Hay or high water, brony, I did. Even the ones that kicked and struggled. I dunno if it was the Princesses watching over me, or what, but everypony I picked up, was still a pony. Some ponies didn't wanna be saved, saying they had families out there. They were the ones that took a right hoof to the muzzle to come quietly."

"Do you think it was right, to take them against their will?"

Dash's face turns from pride to indignation, she slams a hoof onto her table, accentuating her words. "What?! Should I just let them *die*?! I saved *everypony* I could, I was the Element of Loyalty, for pony's sake! I'd *never* leave a Ponyvillian hanging. But yeh...in the end there weren't any screams, all I'd hear when I flew over were their moans. Like...like a choir of demons from the Moon itself."

"What happened next, did they attack the library?"

“Yeh...they surrounded it, trying to get in any way they could. They were climbing over each other to get in, trampling each other into the mud. We pulled ponies off the balcony, wasn't right watching ponies you knew...like that. I even saw a few, but, I suppose everypony's seen somepony they used to know as a Zee.” Dash stops for breath, rubbing the soles of her hooves together thoughtfully. “But we got out, Twilight still had her line to the Princess. Aircarts came, took us ‘somewhere safe,’ but hey, that's another story. Last thing I saw, was Ponyville burning up underneath me. Somepony left the gas on in Sugarcube Corner, one spark in the chaos, and it set off every little thatched house in the town. It's still there today, we promised never to clear it...it's like...a graveyard of lost souls, like they had for the First Pony War? All the ponies that couldn't get identified, or went missing altogether? That's what Old Ponyville is to us.”

“I'm sorry to hear you lost your home so abruptly, without any idea of how or why. But, I understand that New Ponyville is becoming the most populous town in Equestria, after Canterlot of course.”

Dash chuckles, rising from her seat and walking round to me. I also stand up, taking her offered hoofshake. “New Ponyville's cool and all, it's Zee-proof as you can get. But...it's just not *Old* Ponyville. Never will be. Anyway, speaking of keeping it safe, I gotta get back to work. Those red lights? Means we got a Zee attack inbound, at least twenty.”

“Good luck Captain Dash, and thank you for your time.”

“Heheh, maybe another time, this filly's got alot more tales to inspire you with, Quill. Besides, with the NightWatch on the case, these Zees won't know what hit 'em.”

# Case File Three

## Twilight Sparkle

I finally manage to gain access past the elite security teams at the Cloudsdale Presidium. The new seat of power after the fall of Canterlot, Cloudsdale played its crowning moment in history as the sanctuary for Equestrians everywhere. My journey to find interviewees hasn't escaped the attention of one very prominent member of the United Equestrian Democracy, who sent me an express letter by pegasus to come to her for an exclusive interview. Naturally, given her status, I leapt at the chance for a once in a lifetime talk with her.

I find my subject at her desk, the interior of the room hoof-crafted from clouds as all buildings in Cloudsdale are. The Cloudwalker band on my foreleg is still slightly uncomfortable, but definitely beats an express trip to the Equestrian soil.

Twilight regards me over her spectacles as I enter, a pile of paperwork resting on top of the plush, cloudy desk. Said paperwork is rapidly riffled and stacked away by an aura of violet magic, while another similar aura draws a clouch forward for me to sit on. I graciously take the offered seat, and thank my host. She smiles, settling her specs on her desk before leaning towards me.

"Good evening, Quill Stroke. I was told by your superiors about your little quest. I must say as the pony that deals with the statistics, I'd like to be remembered by more than a signature on a damage report and some comments on Infected anatomy. It's an interesting, but more than necessary path you are taking. In my opinion at least, to the moon with your old bosses' wishes."

I nod as politely as possible, in honesty expecting more disappointment for abandoning the UED. However Vice President Twilight is as benevolent as my sources had led me to believe. I smile, feeling more comfortable in the environment, no doubt aided by the plush seating of the clouch.

“It’s nothing short of an honour, ma’am. Your name kept appearing in conversations while I was looking for interviewees. I never imagined you would have the time, much less openly invite me.”

Twilight giggles, unbecoming for a figure of power, but it shows a young filly hiding behind a wizened mare. “Ah, well I have little time spare on my hooves, and I’d rather spend my time discussing matters with you, rather than with ponies at the water cooler. Is there anything in particular you’d like me to talk with you about?”

Not even a second’s hesitation passes, I had explicitly hoped for this openness in my questioning. There was only one, crowning moment in the lifetime of Twilight Sparkle that appealed to me at that point, though many others were jockeying for second place.

“The evacuation to Cloudsdale, ma’am. Where you oversaw it all, I’m told it was you who chose it in the first place.”

Twilight muses over the question, I’m sure many facts and opinions are swirling in her head. Memories begging to be relived first. She strokes a small photo frame to her side with a tentative hoof. I can’t see the photo within, and feel it would be rude to interrupt her to ask about the pony within it.

“Ponyville...it was only the start. Sure, Haltergate...happened beforehoof. Keen Eye’s son was a General Custer the second if ever there was one. Celestia told me all she knew about the Infected. Their likely vectors of attack, the importance of preventing bites and...removing their victims. Ponyville itself was a last-moment thing, I got everypony I could...but not everypony I *wanted*.”

Twilight’s voice catches in her throat, a ripple in her composure appearing like a crack in a pair of curtains. The gap is rapidly closed, and she re-asserts herself.

“We escaped with half the population of the town still alive, although some only just. Celestia and Luna were still administering the evacuation of Canterlot...but to where? We circled Ponyville for a few hours in the aircarts, until the fire consumed most of the town. I felt it necessary to



remove that from ponies' views...the last thing they needed was to see their homes burning beneath them. I gave the order to land at Cloudsdale."

"Surely, with the large earth and unicorn pony population in your aircarts, Cloudsdale was the last possible place on Equestria you *could* land?"

Twilight smirks with an almost haughty grin. "Who do you think designed the Cloudwalker band you're currently wearing? At first I used a Cloudwalker spell instead, the idea to invest its properties into a wearable object came later. I managed to disembark the population onto Cirrus Square, it caused quite a stir amongst the local pegasi population. My trusty assistant, Spike, sent off a letter to Celestia telling her of our new destination."

"Did Celestia send the Canterlot ponies to you afterwards?"

"Yes, well...Luna did. Celestia had already left at that point. Where...no pony knows, even after all this time.. But I digress, she sent *everypony*. Canterlot, HalterGate, Fillydelphia, Manehattan. Within an hour they had disembarked all over the city, and we were packed to the rafters. We managed to round them up, most had simply landed the first place they could find in panic. Some...some were still too scared, they tried to run out onto the clouds...most of the time it was little fillies and colts."

Twilight stops for breath, levitating and sipping a small glass of a sharp-smelling, brown liquid. I suppose everypony has their coping measures for a job as stressful as this. She finishes the glass, panting for breath slightly before continuing.

"Celestia gave me command of the Royal Guards left over from Haltergate. They were split into groups, and stationed around the city. We funnelled refugees towards the base camp at Cirrus Square, while those with magic amongst the Ponyville refugees helped cast the Cloudwalker spells on the new arrivals. We managed to find and deal with all the new arrivals quickly and efficiently. Thankfully, at least some of the local pegasi helped."

"Only some? Surely they would have all tried to help?"

"Pegasi don't like having their space encroached on. Remember, earth ponies and unicorns had never visited Cloudsdale in large numbers

beforehoof. When this happened, they were suddenly swamped in the sick and the wounded. Some helped, others simply demanded the refugees go elsewhere. A lot of cloud homes were damaged by crash-landing aircarts. Some of which landed with Infected on board...but the guards dealt with those swiftly.”

Another glass of the liquid is poured and consumed, Twilight offers a glassful to me, and I decline. I never was a single-malt pony.

“If you’re in my profession, you need it, pony.” Twilight chuckles, swirling the glass around thoughtfully. “Where was I?”

“You were described the organisation of the refugees, just got to the part with Cirrus Square.”

Twilight’s eyes dull over, and her tone drops an octave. “Ah, yes, I remember. I was on wide patrol, helping the guards mobilise to counter Infected crashes, and gather survivors. Medical ponies were at the Square, treating who they could. Most were minor injuries, a cut, grazes from tripping while running. Some were serious. I made my way through the Square, Spike in tow with my clipboard. So many ponies, all colours. All breeds. All frightened, and angry. Some glared at me as I passed, others simply stared sadly. Some didn’t even respond at all...there were so many that simply gave up before the doctors could get to them...not...not even half of them were...of age.”

Twilight stops again, holding her ankle against her mouth, eyes glistening with barely-restrained tears. I feel the interview may be having a worse effect on her than I’d feel comfortable with.

“Ms Sparkle.”

“Please, Quill Stroke...call me Twilight.”

Yes...Twilight. If you feel unable to continue, I am more than happy to stop. I don’t want to inflict any unnecessary trauma.”

Twilight waves a slightly irritated hoof at me, eyes slowly coming under control. “No. I brought you here for the story, and I will tell you it, even if I

break down doing so. Ponies need to know...I need to get this off my chest."

I nod, understanding her resolve. "When you're ready to continue, Twilight."

"Cirrus...Cirrus Square was single-hoofedly the most horrific place I had ever been in. No infected, just teams of doctors sifting through piles of ponies to separate the dead from the unconscious. We had so few medics, we *failed* so many ponies waiting for treatment. Thank Celestia they weren't Infected, some were exhibiting signs of simple normal infected wounds. A cut that had been dirtied in the panic, for example. A single treatment of antibiotics, and those ponies would have been saved. I should have organised it better, separated ponies by their wounds, those who needed it most get it first."

"You did all you could, and managed to stop a worse fate falling on these ponies. Infected in Cloudsdale would have caused a massacre, you prevented that."

Twilight rocks a hoof side to side like a metronome, in an almost playful chiding manner.

"Even Infected pegasi can't walk on clouds. We believe it may be a passive magic pegasi have that the Infected lose...but we know so little about the Infected. I managed to find my friend, Fluttershy...she was helping the fillies and colts find their parents. There were some happy moments, some frantic embraces that made the whole thing worthwhile; as mother, father and young colt shared a joyous moment of reunion. Some...some little fillies were in Fluttershy's care that whole day. So hopeful, so unaware of the events that unfolded around them."

"Weren't we all, Twilight." I try my best to console her, to stop her self-deprecating streak from bringing her down. She was my colthood hero, after all. "No pony I've talked to expected this...how could they?"

Twilight nods, defeated rather than boosted, I notice to my disdain.

"Indeed, Quill Stroke. But so much, so many tiny errors that exploded into massive losses. All avoidable, none more so than Haltergate. Had I the Princesses' full regiments left alive under my control, I would have had the

whole thing sorted from muzzle to tail. I tried to help Fluttershy as long as I could, she was my rock that day. All the horrors unfolding around us, the foals weeping for their mothers following her. She simply spoke in that calming voice she had, 'everything was going to get better.' I wonder if she believed it herself, if maybe it was getting to her, and she was just putting on a brave face. I don't envy her that job, I regret giving a friend such a harrowing task to undertake."

"Are you still in contact with Fluttershy?"

"Yes, we try and organise meetups. It's been a long time since I saw all my friends together...working for the species' benefit has us all so far apart."

She pauses for an airy second, playing idly with a piece of her desk.

"It was in the medical tent where I really lost my control. It was one tent, twenty beds, two medics. Two inside, two outside, that's the medical team we had to deal with the greatest disaster in Equestrian history. They were frantically tending to patients, and I could only watch. Patient to patient, a blur of injections, chest pumps, medication, and other medical techniques. When a patient gave up, a pair of stallions simply brought another in their place. No time or means to sterilise the beds in between...so many *foalish* errors."

"There was one filly...in a corner, strapped down. She was gone. Howling at the bodies around her. nopony had time to watch her, treatment may have been possible, but none of the doctors were available to administer it. She had been turned for at least an hour. The guards didn't want to approach her...but I did."

I gasp, surprised at her actions. "You just *walked* up to the Zed?"

"I did, and she was beyond help...to save her life at least. Celestia had told me there could be no cure, only prevention. It was so hard to imagine it as a monster, even as it writhed and howled. Completely tied down, even its head. I simply blanked out, reached for its neck...and...crack."

Twilight mimes the action, cracking a young filly's neck. I can see the trauma laid bare in her eyes, distant as she considers the repercussions of her actions.

“Five years on, still no cure. I wake up every night, I tell myself it was a mercy...she wasn't a filly anymore. But I'm a pony, and I can't stop imagining her playing in the street. A mother, father and happy life. When Celestia returns, there's a special place on the Moon for me. I did what was necessary...but I'm still a killer. It fades, as you realise there really was no hope. But it's a ghost, always haunting the back of your mind. Funny, I find the pony in such an inpony monster. I suppose I'm a sentimentalist more than a scientist at heart.”

“A lot of ponies had to do similar things, you're no monster. You just did what was right.”

“Cold. Emotionally dead. Simply fulfilling a need. Remind you of anything familiar?” Twilight shoots me a dark look, and I'm lost for words at the implied description of herself.

“Thank you for the effort, but your forgiveness can't make me forgive myself. A pony can never forgive themselves. At least...all this will help offset it.”

She waves a leg around the room, but I feel she is stretching her reach to indicate Equestria, and her hoof in the rebuilding of it.

“But thank you for your time, and your rapid response, Quill Stroke. I'm sorry it was on such short notice, but I needed this story off my chest. Ponies in the years that will come need to know what sacrifices need to be made sometimes. Even if your morals vilify it.”

I rise from my couch, shaking Twilight by her offered hoof. She smiles and nods, settling back down and burying herself back into the paperwork. As I lean over, I glance at the photo frame on her desk. Within it is a charred and aged photo of a small filly, a light pink unicorn with a blonde mane, all smiles and bright eyes. I pull back, and Twilight stares at me, knowing what I saw. She simply nods slowly, answering my unasked question. I bid my farewell, taking my troubled thoughts with me, and departing the office block for my next interview.

# Case File Four

## Trot Wainier

I knock, carefully, on the door, the rattling of my hoof on wood reverberating through the quiet Manehattan district. The once bustling district of Marelem is now a ghost town, old newspapers flick through the streets in the light breeze, this district still declared, '*unstable*,' by local security forces.

Not that any of this perturbs my next interviewee, however. Despite constant attempts to remove him from his home for his own safety, he has flatly refused the local security forces from down the sight of his weapon. The door is opened, a middle-aged mare greeting me with a smile and an opened door. I take the offered entry, returning the smile as I pass. She directs me to the living room, where my interviewee is waiting. He rises from his armchair, shaking me vigorously by the hoof. A cup of coffee is offered by the mare, which I decline. Coffee never was a drink I enjoyed. Instead, I find a mug of tea thrust into my hooves, and I graciously accept it, before taking a seat on the couch.

Trot Wainier shifts in his armchair, getting himself comfortable once more. His dark blue mane shows more than a few signs of greying hairs, his face, itself, beginning to sag. Yet, between the wrinkled crows feet, are two eyes, incandescent with the heat of a younger pony. I would expect nothing less from the ex-Captain of the Royal Guard.

"So, Quill Stroke, is it?"

"Yes, I talked to you on the phone a little while back. You said you were there at Haltergate?"

Trot chuckles, nodding his head. "Haltergate, Sandineigho, Fort Hope. I was there for hay-near every campaign in the war."

"Wow, you're quite the vet then? How long were you in the Guard before the war started?"

Trot strokes his head with a hoof, muttering to himself. I can only imagine that, like many other ponies, 'before the war' for him is a distant dream.

“Gotta have been...two years. Still pretty much a greenhorn in that aspect. Well, if I had a horn, that is. If I did have a horn, I wouldn't have been at Haltergate.”

The implications of Trot's musings intrigue me, and I feel the need to have them elaborated on.

“So, only earth ponies were at Haltergate?”

“Oh, no, the unicorns were there. Our superiors, half a klick away from the fight. And the peggies were just as high up in the sky. Nope, it was us dirt-kickers that had to face Zack muzzle-to-muzzle.”

“What about weapons, were you well equipped for the challenge?”

Trot outright laughs at this question. I give him a moment to recollect himself before we continue. “Buddy, we were equipped with everything Auntie Cel stashed in her gun closet. We had battlecarts, peggies with combat rigs in the air, full battle dress and best of all...Hoof Warrior.”

“Hoof...Warrior?”

“Experimental. Top-of-the-range. Best thing since sliced oatmeal, et cetera, et cetera. Hoof Warrior was this visor you mounted over your muzzle. It gave you a marker for other ponies in your squad, peggy-eye view of the battlefield, mark-ups for enemy positions, everything. You, as a hoofsoldier on the field, could see *everything* going on around you. Woulda helped a tonne back in the Gryphon Wars.”

“Were you in the Gryphon Wars? They were before my time, and I've heard little about them.”

“That's because everypony only worries about the last war. By the time you've perfected the art of fighting a war, it's over, and the next one starts. I was there as a fresh recruit near the end, at the battle of Hatchlings' Eyrie. It was only a year after we'd beat those stubborn rumpholes into a surrender, that Zack showed up, I was still green as grass when it came.”

Trot takes a slug of his coffee, and I feel obligated to drink some of the tea I was given. It's cold, my attention diverted to Trot's story much more than his wife's tea-making skills.

"I was with Barn company, we had Apple company and Canter company supporting us. Canter was all cavalry, lined up right along the edge of Haltergate, facing out towards Manehattan and Fillydelphia. Four-hundred good stallions...bucking wasted."

"Your superiors ordered a cavalry charge straight at the Zeds?"

"My, 'superior,' was Clear Gaze, Keen Eye's son. He got promoted to General right about the time Zack was picking his dad outta their teeth. Poor buckner wanted only one thing, every Zack from here to Central Park, dead. He half got his wish, I guess."

Trot calls through for another coffee, and as if she were waiting on standby, his wife appears, two cups balanced on a hoof for us both. I gratefully accept the refill, and we return to our story.

"Sorry, caffeine keeps me running. I burnt out my youth in these campaigns years ago, ain't got much left of it. Anyway, where was I?"

"Canter Company. The cavalry charge."

"Alright, gimme a sec. Yeh. Clear Gaze was heading the show, his plan woulda stopped a horde of gryphons right in their talony tracks. For Zack? Not so much. Haltergate was at a fork in the road, the Inter-Equestrian twelve and twenty-three highways from Manehattan and Fillydelphia, converged into one road before leading into the town. We'd have Zack bottlenecked and trussed up like a turkey. Canter was meant to charge right at Zack, cut up a bunch of their vanguard, then pull back while we, in Barn company, rained hay on them from two ridges running each side of the road. That was my job, the squad markspony. We had these new crossbows straight outta testing, things fired flaming bolts quicker than a parasprite's lunch."

"What about Apple company, and the pegasi?"

"Apple were at the town entrance itself. They were the smallest company, fifty ponies, Canter was four hundred, Barn being about two hundred. Apple was stuck in the path of Zack, there to pick off the odd survivor from our gunfire. We fired from the left and right flanks to cut 'em up. The peggies



were in strafing and bombing mode up the entire highway, cutting down what was coming to us as much as possible.”

“Sound like the perfect battle strategy, what went wrong?”

“In a war, you don’t kill other ponies, Quill. You kill vermin, infidels or demons. You can’t kill other ponies unless somepony makes you believe they ain’t ponies, that they’re worse than you...sub-pony. We had ponies stumbling up the highway here, average Stallion Joes and Filly Mays in their birthday coats. Some were dressed up in business suits, some in hospital overalls, some still in their school uniforms.”

Trot swigs another lump of coffee down his throat, shivering as the heat burns him on the way down.

“Canter charged in, full-bore. But what was a bottleneck for Zack, was a bottleneck for us too. Canter scrunched up like a scrim, the point of cavalry is to rush through a group, but they hit a wall of Zack...and that’s when the horse apples hit the hay.”

“They were blocked in, by their own ponies?”

“Exactly. Canter had bunched up twenty ponies deep in this highway road, ones at the front lost momentum and Zack just reached out and dug in. Poor buckers behind ‘em saw all this, started backpedalling. What you got was the least organised and bloodiest cavalry retreat Equestrian history’s ever suffered. We got ordered onto the ridge to fire at everything we saw, there was Zack lying on the floor pinning some of Canter company down while others swarmed on top, and even more just climbed right over them all.”

“How about Barn, did you manage to thin them out enough to re-counter?”

“Didn’t have time. Somewhere, in a tent a half-klick away from there, Clear Gaze was balling his orders. Soon as we tried to start keeping Zack back, he called in the peggies. We ducked behind the ridge while they strafed, bombed and generally bucked Zack up. Thing is, you can’t just kill Zack that easy. No, we had heads and half-bodies flying into the air around as. Crawlers actually fell straight onto somepony on my platoon. We shot it off,

but it had already sunk its teeth right into him. That's when I switched over to Hoof Warrior's Pegasus-Eye View, to check the road behind the ridge."

"Was it clear, did the bombing keep them back?"

"Hay no, it did not. Zack was pouring through, more than ever! Right onto Apple who were about as prepared as a bunch of schoolfillies. They broke ranks, at least the ones who survived did. I zoomed out the view, and I'm not afraid to admit it, son. I pissed my pants right there and then."

"What did you see?"

"We were dealing with hundreds at the fork there, but Hoof Warrior showed them *all the way* back to Manehattan! A long, bucking snake of Zack from Haltergate all the way to Central Park. Fillydelphia was still coming, I could see the little tentacle still trying to connect to the Manehattan horde. We weren't even dealing with half of it! Even more were just walking across country where we couldn't funnel them in and chew them up. Clear Gaze cut the comm right then. Radio was jammed with screams anyway."

Trot finishes his coffee, mumbling to himself as I can only imagine he considers his story. I give him all the time he needs, and he eventually returns to it after a moment.

"Comm was down, Hoof Warrior straight after. We got ordered to retreat to the town square, bulk up with the battlecarts rolling out to meet them. They poured every moonfire spell we had, every crossbow bolt was fired, every combat knife flung into the horde. Nothing. They swarmed over the battlecarts, stallions inside were safe, but hardly in a comfortable position. We pulled further and further back, Zack eating up the ground and the soldiers defending it. In a matter of an hour, we lost Haltergate."

"How did you escape the capture?"

"Battlecart that was pulling out. Half my squad was left, we jumped in and hightailed it on the General's orders. Zack had eaten up the town, I never saw the bomb go off. I was still in the battlecart, busting our rumps outta that hayhole. Blast buckin' tipped the thing straight over, only thing keeping us safe from the fire was the armour plating. We crawled out; cart was busted, but nothing was left to attack us. I've never met anypony who was

there at Haltergate. There's something beautiful about the alicorn bomb. The wrath of Auntie Cel's sun sat right on an enemy position. Haltergate, the IE-highway and near five hundred soldiers, were nothing but a blaze. But I could still see them. A dark shadow through the smoke, that big-flank horde of Zack...still coming, after all that."

"So, did you end up in Cloudsdale after all this?"

"Eventually, yeh. Right after Clear Gaze put a bolt between his teeth, and we gave a breakdown on what the buck he did wrong."

"What did he do wrong? Why didn't these tactics work for this war?"

"Because Zack ain't a pony, he ain't even an animal. He wants to chow, he's gunna chow. Hay or high water, he's eating tonight. You blow off his limbs, you slaughter a hundred of his buddies in front of him, you cut off his bucking head...he's still chomping. Ponies don't fight to kill, nopony starts a war with the idea of killing every single one of the enemy. You both wave your sticks at each other, and whoever has the biggest scares the other colt. Shock and awe, but Zack don't care about that. Our entire mantra, from a fearsome cavalry charge, to raining fire on the horde, was to shock and awe. When Zack shrugged it off, when they walked right through the fire and stepped over their fallen comrades. Well, they shock and awed us right back."

# Case File Five

## Major Spitfire

My quest for interviewees brings me back once more to Cloudsdale. In honesty, it's hardly surprising, given the city's new status as the pseudo-capital of Equestria. While New Ponyville has become the population capital, and Canterlot is rapidly becoming the political capital once more, Cloudsdale is still considered to be the bastion of ponykind in these troubled times.

I enter the Altostratus retirement home in something of a daze. The main lobby is vast. Tall, regal pillars of marble mingle with soft, fluffy cloud ceilings, vaulted high above my head. The room is spacious beyond belief, yet cramped with sofas and clouches for the residents of the home. The building was one of the first to be built after the earth pony migration to Cloudsdale, and carries many of the hallmarks of earth-pegasus hybrid architecture. What isn't expertly sculpted cloud formations is replaced by rustic wooden beams and chandeliers. Somehow, it seems far too regal for a retirement home.

My subject is sitting by the edge of the room, near a vast, glassless bay window opening out over Equestria. The retirement home is fortunate in its placement, standing on the edge of Cloudsdale's lower districts. As a result, we are treated to a breathtaking panorama of the Applelachian mountains, with the now refurbished jewel that is Canterlot glimmering on their summit. Only one thing mars the beauty of the landscape; a small, burnt area of land, seemingly avoided by the fervent plant-life thriving around it. The site of Old Ponyville.

I take a seat, the pegasus clouches becoming less of a luxury and more of a daily pleasure during these interviews. Despite the disarming nature of the comfortable furniture, I remain intent. My subject sits across from me, idly gazing out over the landscape. I noticed her eyes aren't pointed at any particular piece of Equestria, merely the sky presiding above it.

"Miss Spitfire?" I clear my throat, gaining more volume. "We talked via letter, about an interview on your career in the EAF?"

Spitfire groans slightly, shifting from her previous comfortable position to face me. She rubs her eyes, evidently the life of the once meteoric pegasus has slowed down lately.

“Quill Stroke, right? Nice to put a name to a face.” She stretches out a hoof, and I shake it firmly. “Now, my stint in the EAF was pretty long, you got a part in particular you wanna hear about?”

I idly leaf through my notes, finding one excerpt in particular.

“How about the time you were flying a mission, and ended up in Froggy Bottom Bog?”

Spitfire eyes me with something of a cautionary glare. I hold the eye contact, slipping my notes back into my saddlebag. She nods slowly as our silent standoff fades away, licking her lips before she begins.

“Well, if you want that story. We’re looking...oh, a month after the dirt kickers at Haltergate got their rumps hoofed to them. The EAF was taken under Governor Sparkle’s control, as was the whole military. We got put on a big diet, cut down to the bone. Combat rigs were scrapped. As well as all our firepower. Pyroclastic Spheres, Inferno Sticks, everything. It all got scrapped and the EAF went to a supply ferrying role.”

“Why was that, didn’t you need the firepower?”

“Not after the, ‘Bodies-to-Bits,’ ratio was invented. We only had Cloudsdale at the time, it couldn’t support a fully-fledged military structure. For every airborne Haywrecker you had in the sky, you had four ponies on the ground, keeping fuel for the combat rig, spare parts for repairs, food for the pilot. The whole thing was expensive, and if Haltergate proved anything, it was that forty pegasi with a payload from the Princesses couldn’t do buck to Zack. Our firepower was designed to maim and debilitate, but killing Zack needs precision we couldn’t have.”

“So what happened, what did you get instead?”

“Combat rigs went, and we got the LRR, Long Range Rig. Cheap as hay, couldn’t pull anywhere near the Mach that the F Ninety-Nine we had before

could. Main advantage was it was cheap, it held a magic charge for three times as long, and it only needed one unicorn on the ground crew.”

“Sounds fairly good, despite the lack of speed, at least. I get the impression you dislike them, however.”

Spitfire chuckles, worming her way further into her clouch.

“How do you think I ended up in Froggy Bottom Bog? Me and Soarin were flying a supply run. Cloudsdale used to supply small homesteads with weapons and food. A whole lot of little villages and large buildings that got fortified became our ports in the storm. We could land, the EAF kept refuel teams there as well. Me and Soarin had been through thick and thin, what with the Griffon Wars followed by Zack showing up. It was nice to have familiarity in unfamiliar times. Hay, some of those were the best places to let your mane down after a long flight. They were...outside the law, if you catch my breeze.”

“I’ll ask no questions about that, then. What about the Bog itself, what happened with the rig?”

“Ah, yeh, sorry. Age makes a filly forget, y’know. Right. Yeh, we were right over the bog when the rig started to choke. I only got a second to start pulling the thing off before the vent shot flames out, and bailed right as the thing exploded.”

“It *exploded*?!”

“Early ‘teething problems.’ Things held a magical charge well, but a fault here and there caused the magic to leak out, then explode. Like prodding a needle in a balloon. Anyway, me and Soarin were flying close at the time, and while I didn’t realise it, I’d bailed my rig straight at him. Needless to say, it hit us both. My right wing got burnt up, and Soarin got knocked straight off course. We both deployed our ‘chutes right as the wind picked up.”

“And you landed in the Bog?”

“Yup, right outside Old Ponyville, heart of Zackestria. I touched down on a nice, dry patch. Soarin was off-course to my east. I had my survival kit out

before my hooves hit the ground, and I pounded my way over to where I last saw him. Compass, a radio, and a local map of the area. Twenty years of military training did the rest for me. I buzzed the radio as I ran, but couldn't call up any nearby outposts."

"Did you find Soarin?"

"Yeh." Spitfire sighed, rubbing the side of her head with a hoof. "I heard him first, though. By the time I reached him...no. Zack had got to him first, he was trussed up like a turkey in his parachute cords. Dangling like an apple on a branch. The Zack was still there...chowing down. It had...it had gotten...*entangled* in him, his innards caught around its neck. So every time it moved, it rang him like a bucking bell!"

Spitfire stifles herself with a hoof, waving over at a nearby attendant. The nurse brings a glass of water, smiling as Spitfire sips it slowly, calming herself.

"I still had my sidearm. Mini-crossbow, perfectly silent. Put one in the Zack while it was busy. Soarin was down. I was all alone...and that's when she showed up."

"A pony living in the bog?"

"No, a mare, Skywatcher, on my radio. Frequency just popped up on the thing. 'I saw an explosion in the sky, is there a flight crew out there? Somepony, anypony, respond!' So I did. She seemed glad to hear I was okay, and that I'd taken care of the Zack. She was nearby, but the shack she was broadcasting from was surrounded, I couldn't go there. She helped kick my rump into gear, though. 'Come on, you're a military pilot! Look on your map; use those falcon eyes and find a way out. There's an overpass through the bog between Ponyville and Haltergate, a good place for an airlift.'"

I simply nod my head, slowly, peeking at my notes before Spitfire continues.

"She helped me pull it together, got me to count up my gear, get my sidearm loaded and sorted. I was ready, the overpass was only three clicks away, I could make it if I kept good pace. I was about to leave the clearing

before I heard her voice again. 'Forgetting somepony?' I turned back around, Soarin had just...turned, still tangled up, but reaching out to me. Friend of twenty years, and the last moment I see him was this. I put a bolt in his brow, sucked it up, and hauled my rump to the overpass."

"Was it difficult, moving through the bog?"

"Difficult? Hay yeh. Scary, too. Zack doesn't need air, he can hang out in a swamp for a decade, just waiting. Any pool could have been holding a small army. Just one slip, I fall in. Zack gets that lunch he's been hoping for. I managed to get a good klick down in an hour, given the terrain, when I heard them. Off to my east, then south, behind me. Then my west, and north. Zack had me surrounded. Boy, he must love the smell of military hardflank. I was at a sorta clearing, there were no trees, and only shallow pools. A cart loaded with food supplies was there, bogged down and abandoned. I climbed up on it, Skywatcher helping me along. 'First rule of fighting Zack, get as high up as you can.' I sat there, listening to the howls. Waiting."

"How many came?"

"Twenty, maybe more. They came one, maybe two at a time. Easy as long as I kept my cool. Skywatcher let me know when one was close. 'Load, deep breath, fire, repeat. That's the mantra. Zack ain't rushing, filly, why are you?' Let's just say, when it was done I didn't need to step in any more puddles on the way out. But that was only the start, when Zack howls, other Zacks hear him, and howl. I'd have the whole bog on me in an hour, at most. That's when I really start to pull my rump into motion."

"Skywatcher helped you see the Zeds?"

"She could hear them getting close on the radio. She told me."

"Okay. Please, continue."

"Right, I had two klicks down and one left to burn. Whole swamp was alive with that long, droning howl. It's not like wolves, or something. You can tell the wolves are speaking to each other when they howl, coordinating. There's intelligence in there. Zack, he just sorta...does it. No real reason or planning why. I ended up at a large cliff; fairly steep, but easy enough to



get down. At least, if I didn't have the hordes of the moon on my tail, and ringing in my ears. I tried to move too quick and slipped, rolled mane over tail, and hit the rock at the bottom. Hard."

"Were you injured?"

"Pretty badly, yeh. Right, rear hoof was twisted, and my front, right leg got cut by a piece of flint on the rock. Hurt like hay to put weight on them, and you can't gallop with half your legs. I ended up lying there, sinking into the mud, crying. Waiting for Zack to stumble over and get it done."

"What stopped you? What...saved you?"

"Skywatcher." Spitfire's expression turns to a dreamy smile, staring out once more at the sun, now setting across the sky. "'Are you hurt, filly? Get up, I can hear Zack loud and clear, and this is on a bucking radio!' I didn't wanna, it hurt like a mule and I just wanted it to stop. She yelled every insult I've ever heard at me, before she pulled out the big guns. 'You wanna end up like your mother!?' That got my rump out of the mud. Got me stumbling, legs burning, eyes streaming. Half a klick left, she said. A hoofstep at a time. I could see the overpass, now. It was only a half-klick away, like she said, so close."

"What about the Zeds, were they close, too?"

"Closer than I thought. A few fell down the cliff as I was stumbling away. Buckers either didn't get hurt, or didn't notice. Quarter-klick left. Skywatcher was pouring it into my head. 'C'mon Spit, you can do it. Come on, only a few more metres. Don't stop now, Little Lantern!' I stumbled, tripped and crawled my way there. I hauled rump up that overpass, and I popped my flare right as I reached the top. Zack was all over the swamp below, whole place lit up like a hive. I didn't care, because I could see two pegasi circling the swamp, heading over to me. Felt like a good idea to black out at the time."

"And when you came to?"

"I was in the Cirrus Square Military Hospital. Stitches and bandages holding me together. Docs took the tests, mulled over the psych reports, then

struck me off active duty, due to trauma. Add to that my legs still being a little stiff, and my right wing...well. It still can't quite move like it used to do."

"That seems quite harsh, what caused the psychiatric review?"

Spitfire levels her gaze with me, though her mane has lost its intensity with age, her eyes still carry the kindling of her namesake.

"I recognise those reports in your notes, don't play dumb with me. I don't bucking care what some white-coat tells me. I don't care that they tell me no ponies live near Froggy Bottom Bog, that it's not a tactical asset. I don't care that no pony called Skywatcher is on their rolls, not even that she knew about my mother, that my mother was called Skygazer, and she knew the nickname my mother used to give me. You have your story, Quill Stroke. Take it for the words of a crazy mare, or the tale of a troubled filly in even more troubled times. Your choice, but my part in it? It finished just after I woke up in that hospital."