

## The Twilight War

### Part IV

By: Kenai

"They'll come back for us, won't they? Sir?" A nervous voice enquired, one General Archer recognized even over the chaos of nearby battle. It was his staff intelligence officer, Lieutenant Sage. Though an admirable officer, she was young, and their current dire straits weighed heavily on his mind thanks in no small part to officers like her; too young to be meeting their ends so soon.

Of any of the ponies on his staff, Archer knew she realized better than most just how bad off they were. "Of course they will. Need I remind you that no Equestrian officer has surrendered to an enemy in two thousand years?"

The Lieutenant did not seem reassured by her blue-furred leader. "We weren't at war for a thousand of those years" she pointed out "and before that our last conflict was a civil war."

"Just the same, I trust the Sky Marshal-sorry Supreme Commander. I've saved her flank enough times that she owes me." General Archer nodded to himself, continuing to stare at the tactical map laid out in front of him in hopes of a sudden inspiration. His army was hemmed in, surrounded on all sides by Griffon mobile infantry and their air forces above. They had taken cover in a stand of dense trees, the last piece of cover between the Griffon border and Fort Equinox. They were only about thirty minutes away from the Fort by air, but they were fighting hoof and tail just to hold on; they hadn't seen any friendly air support in a day. If they could just get some decent support they could make a break for it, but without it they would be slaughtered in the open; their organic anti-air units were not nearly strong enough.

His reverie was broken by an abrupt explosion of sound, concussive force thumping through his hooves as a AAA battery outside of his 'headquarters' opened fire, buzz saw-like sound briefly drowning out all else. Clearly, the griffons were getting braver. The General looked around the tent, officers going about their duty with dark expressions coloring the features. He smiled to himself, fierce grin defiant of their doomed expressions "By Celestia, I love that sound."

The assembled officers shared a nervous chuckle before moving on with their duties. Archer nodded to himself again. They would hold; they had no choice. Ammunition supplies be damned. Reflexively he felt for his sidearm, making sure it's reassuring weight was on his person as he fumbled with a cigar. Today was going to be an interesting day.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rainbow Dash knelt beside the bed that the familiar blue pegasus lay upon. It was funny, she recalled so readily how much she idolized him in her teenage years. Soarin' looked mildly confused by her presence, but then he was doped up on painkillers pretty heavily. Dash was merely relieved he was alive at all. Though he didn't yet know it, Rarity as Regent of Equestria bestowed upon him the Bridle of Valor, Equestria's highest military honor, upon hearing of his part in the charge that broke the Griffon's

previous assault on Fort Equinox. If only it had stopped them. Dash gingerly placed the box on the table beside his bed, trying to ignore the many injuries covering his body, particularly the wings. Doctors said he might well lose them, a terrible fate that all pegasi feared nearly as much as death. As Dash turned to leave, her tail bumped the table, sending an apple pie falling.

"M-my pie" Soarin' mumbled drowsily.

Dash deftly ducked down and caught it, placing it back in a safer position. "Get well soon, Soarin'." Dash said, leaving the room. Fortunately, her next stop was only one building over. Not that such a short walk saved her much from her thoughts. Injured ponies, particularly pegasi filled nearly every room of the hospital, all of whom were effectively here because of her orders. She couldn't help but cringe as she realized how many of these ponies belonged to the 3rd Fighter Wing. Aside from the amount of casualties being simply atrocious, the 3rd was her best trained wing, to lose so many of them so early into the war did not bode well for them.

*"The important thing was, they held."* Dash struggled to remind herself as she stepped over a sleeping pony in the hall, his young form covered in bandages. *"They did their job so you could do yours"* Dash stepped around another pony, this one with bandages on its back where her wings were amputated. Dash tried but couldn't bring herself to make eye contact with the pegasi, her fierce glare drilling daggers into her back as the Supreme Commander walked away. *"Keep it together, you've seen worse."*

\*\*\*\*\*

Nerves slightly frayed by her hospital visit, Dash paused for a moment before the briefing room door to gather herself. Breathing out a deep breath, she pushed open the door, trotting in. The room was the largest briefing room on base, long table seating her staff officers and the higher ranked generals, with auditorium -style tiered seating holding a collection of colonels and more staff officers. As many ponies as could be here without compromising their field leadership were gathered here, and as one they stood, to attention as Dash entered. Twilight Sparkle and her higher ranked mages were in attendance as well, Twilight seated at the opposite end of the table from Dash's own seat.

"As you were" Dash nodded, flying over to and alighting at her place at the head of the table. The assembled officers took their seats, notepads opening as the projector warmed, showing a static version of the tactical map in the operations center.

"I won't lie to you" Dash said, breaking the hushed silence of the room "It looks bad" she motioned to the map "I personally see a whole lot more red on this map than there should be. But" Dash looked around the room, eyes peering into those of her officers "We are not done yet. May I introduce you to what we're calling Operation Clear Skies. Captain."

From her seat next to the Supreme Commander, Captain Scootaloo stood, flicking a button on the nearby projector remote. A new slide appeared, a complicated maneuver map taking the place of the tactical map. A gasp of surprise escaped from someone in the crowd as they realized the scale of what she was proposing. "As you can see, this is somewhat ambitious. Thanks to a few tricks that we have in

store though, I think you will agree that it is doable. We are abandoning Fort Equinox."

A murmur ran through the room as the officers discussed it among their neighbors. Equinox was the lynchpin of every contingency plan drawn up to date, to abandon it was *interesting* to say the least. Rainbow Dash spoke up, heading off General Sunny Meadow, one of her Air Force officers before she could open her mouth. No need for them to attack Scoots for what was her idea. "Before anypony says this is a bad idea, need I remind you that this will relieve General Archer's pocket? Or do you think it would be a better idea to let that cowboy continue to think he's free of us? Personally the latter worries me more than whatever the Griffons will do."

Chuckles rippled through the officers, particularly the Army officers that knew him personally; the Supreme Commander certainly had that much right. "As the Commander says, sirs" Scootaloo continued unshaken "we must relieve General Archer. His last status report indicated he had about a day, maybe two of ammunition left. If he runs out he'll have no choice but to surrender."

Rainbow Dash cleared her throat, standing and leaning on the table with her forehooves, tapping the tabletop for emphasis. "Let me make one thing clear, when we start going, we are going to go and go and not stop until we are either dead or achieve our mission. We're gonna attack all day, all of tomorrow, and however long it takes. We will **not** abandon General Archer, and the first pony to suggest it I'll have brought up on treason."

"To this end, we are setting up the razing charges as we speak." Scootaloo said "Moving the wounded will be the hardest part of this plan, but by leaving some of the heavier ammunition pallets off the trucks we can make up the difference. Thanks to the efforts of Archmage Sparkle and her mages" Twilight nodded appreciatively in response "We have been able to teleport those in critical condition to Canterlot General Hospital. Phase one of Clear Skies will involve an attack by the remnants of the 3rd FW, reinforced by the 511th Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron..."

\*\*\*\*\*

"All stations, All stations, CLYDESDALE, solid readings on four-five-oh bogies bearing one-eight-zero, Angels-seven. It's game time people."

Status reports began to fill the radio as the Equestrian Royal Air Force took to the skies. Those already in the air fired whatever they could at the oncoming formation before breaking back to base, contrails of smoke and vapor carving paths through the sky.

The Griffons however, were smart. Fort Equinox had resisted their attempts to take it for the past few days, this time they were playing for keeps. Cruise missiles, flying low to the ground and driven by un-jammable inertial navigation systems streaked in, nearly invisible to the anti-air emplacements on the ground. Whoever it was that was in command of them clearly knew what she was doing, as the strike was not aimed for the command and control radar; knowing how data-linked most Equestrian systems are she had opted instead to simply blow away all of the Surface to Air missile launchers and anti-aircraft guns. Dirty orange flames and shattered chassis were all that remained of the ground defenses.

Rainbow Dash resisted the urge to show her hand immediately and blow the insolent featherbrains out of the sky right then and there. She was in the air herself, armored like any other Pegasus, albeit hanging back with some of the few aircraft of the Equestrian Air Force. With the bulk of their forces equipped with flight armor, the ERAF had little need for conventional aircraft, but they did operate a few. Essentially they were airborne "Carriers", open -topped platforms propelled by turbofan engines that could repair and rearm an entire fighter wing by themselves. Dash was nearest to one of the Airborne Early Warning and Control variants, the eponymous call sign CLYDESDALE.

Dash consulted her displays, checking the numbers. Only a hundred and eighty of the Pegasi based out of Fort Equinox remained combat capable, to answer the four hundred some Griffons coming their way. Most pegasi would have balked at such disparity, but most pegasi were not Rainbow Dash. She had a few things that would shift the balance in her favor, and she set about organizing them.

Scotaloo's voice crackled over the radio on a private channel "Sorry to interrupt ma'am, but I thought you would appreciate this. Our operatives have confirmed the enemy is being led by General Gilda herself."

Dash frowned to herself, shaking her head slowly. That griffon just didn't learn. Still, Dash had studied Gilda's work at war college, read her books on airborne infantry tactics. This would be interesting indeed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Speeding towards Fort Equinox in formation, Major General Gilda beamed to herself. She was still slightly bruised from the thrashing Dash had given her, but it had hurt her pride more than it had injured her. Today she would make up for that. Today, she had a far more powerful force than the rookies that had been with her that day.

"I'm coming for you Dashie, let's see if you've learned any new moves." The armored griffon chuckled, watching the progress of the cruise missile salvo proceed exactly as predicted, hitting every target perfectly.

"Ma'am?" her communications officer enquired.

"Nothing. Signal all wings, Bloodied Talon is go."

"Yes ma'am, executing." The order went out. Each griffon was carrying a single extended range missile (ERAM), the Griffon answer to the Equestrian LRSM. Griffon technology hadn't managed to miniaturize rocket hardware to the degree that Equestria had, but what it lacked in sophistication the missile made up for in brute force, and actually came out slightly longer ranged. Gilda was trying something new here herself as well. The manufacturer did not suggest firing the missile from such a range as they were at now (roughly 120 clicks) due to their weak onboard sensor suites, but they had to eliminate the Equestrian carriers. They were one of the biggest problems the Griffons had to overcome, for they could maneuver and escape where stationary bases could not. To compensate for the lack of sensor range Gilda had devised a solution; Griffon Mobile Infantry force recon elements would "paint" targets for the missiles, steering them in after they were fired.

The missiles issued forth in a cloud of smoke. Gilda thrashed her wings in frustration as *only* three hundred of them actually fired, the remainder being duds. They seriously needed to improve their production lines quality.

\*\*\*\*\*

Supreme Commander Rainbow Dash gasped in surprise as the missile salvo materialized on her readouts. That was the first time they had ever done *that* before. Dash stared at her HUD as more information streamed in. The system had tagged them as Mark I ERAMs, fired well beyond their effective range. Scare tactics again, it had to be.

Or was it?

Doubt gnawed at Rainbow Dash as she watched the agonizing seconds tick by as the missiles closed. If she ordered her forces to fire on the missiles with their dog-fighting missiles (targets they could certainly hit given the massive size of an ERAM) they could thin out the salvo pretty heavily, but if they were decoys it would significantly reduce her fighting capability.

Dash made up her mind, she would have to trust her intel and hope it was right. "All units, all units, BOOMER actual, go to defense protocol Alpha-Bravo-Mike-One and stand by." ABM-1 was a conservative call, ECM and guns only. If it was a ruse, it wouldn't waste valuable missiles.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gilda squawked inside her helmet in laughter. They weren't doing anything, flying along fat and happy. Exactly as she planned. "EAGLE Actual to NIGHTSTALKER, go to phase two."

Less than a klick away from Fort Equinox, Gilda's force recon teams stepped into motion. Having brought with them a Command and Control vehicle, the griffons went to work. Radar pulses radiated from the vehicle, bouncing off the massive forms of the carriers with ease. Everything seemed normal, apart from something being off about those clouds. The techs ignored it; that was not their mission, and with that active radar their time was limited. With a push of the button the ERAMs perked up, new fresh targets that they could see without their pathetic sensors.

"NIGHTSTALKER-one-one, targets painted, we're exfiltrating now." With that the Griffons took to the sky, flying low towards friendly lines.

\*\*\*\*\*

Dash was really fidgeting now. The enemy was coming into engagement range, about 50 klicks out and falling fast. That was when all hell broke loose in her helmet, Radar Warning Receiver blaring its alarm over all else. Dash squelched it. "CLYDESDALE, BOOMER actual, I'm getting active radar pings from the ground, blue on blue?"

"Uh" the controller paused, confused as the Supreme Commander was. "That's a negative BOOMER. All stations, all stations, be advised hostile Anti-air detected nearby, stand by for further updates."

"Hmmm" Dash thought for a moment. She couldn't spare any of her close air support to stop whatever this trick was, but she did have at least one wing of Wild Weasels around. "Find whatever SEAD wings we have working in the area, and shut that down" Dash ordered. This could be closer than she expected. The missiles were getting closer. Dash paused, hovering in midair, icy despair sinking in as she realized what was going on.

"WEASEL one-one, magnum away." Anti-radiation missiles stabbed into the forest below, white hot fragments shredding the delicate radar array, but it was too late, the ERAMs had what they needed, and so they began their final attack runs, cybernetic brains driven with the simple minded desire to seek their own immolation among the Carriers. This was going to hurt.

Onboard the carriers and among the fighter-pegasi, missile defense protocols were initiated. White noise jammers began blasting out interference, swamping the missiles with clutter as decoy launchers went into overdrive. Where once were four carriers and an AWACs, there was now thousands. Roughly a quarter of the missiles immediately lost their locks, seeking out any and all nearby targets. Some acquired pegasi, but the vast majority of those that lost their locks wandered off course and detonated, unable to acquire a target with their weak onboard sensors and bereft of external guidance.

Watching in horror as the missiles sailed across the outer engagement envelope Dash was left to stare helplessly as the point defenses on board the carriers and their escorting wings began to respond. Miniguns spun up before belching out great clouds of hot lead, scything through the air like a doctors scalpel, carving missile after missile out of the air. Shredded missile fuselages filled the air, pockmarked by dirty orange fireballs as counter-missile fire tagged a few. The volley of 300 missiles was down to a hundred and fifty, and they were all aimed squarely at the only four airborne carriers this side of Equestria. The maelstrom swooped down upon them, down into the terminal intercept zone, the last line of defense. Recognizing their doom, the carriers belched all of their decoys, flares and chaff; orange fireballs encased their forms as great iridescent clouds of metallic chaff blossomed across the sky. Massive explosions stabbed through the fireworks as the downpour of missiles descended upon them.

If there was one thing to be happy about, it was that CLYDESDALE somehow managed to escape unharmed, with the carrier nearest it also coming off lightly. The others were not so lucky. One shattered into a thousand flaming shards as missile fire pummeled it into oblivion, its light armor unable to protect it. Its neighbor was shorn in two by the missile fire, halves tumbling end over end to a fiery conclusion in the forest below. Dash cut off the SAR frequency she was listening in on, it was too depressing. That was one surprise too many this battle, Dash could not let Gilda retain the initiative. "All wings, all wings, go to phase two, fire plan Thunderhead."

\*\*\*\*\*

Gilda squawked with glee as she watched the missile salvo hit home. Two carriers obliterated and the other two damaged, that was better results than she had ever dreamed of. With their mobile support slashed, they couldn't just sit back and lob LRSMs at her forces all day, they would have to close in and engage in a good old fashioned dogfight. This was her goal, to force that close range engagement, as that

was where her forces were strongest.

The griffon switched to the command channel. "Excellent job, all forces close and engage. Today we break the enemy."

Gilda was almost disappointed, she remembered Dash being smarter than this.

\*\*\*\*\*

Colonel Spitfire stared at her radar display with emotionless, jaded eyes. Even with the tricks the Supreme Commander had up her sleeves, there was no way they could possibly hope to stop this many. They were finished. She sighed, loading the predetermined fire plan into her targeting systems. Two volleys and break, that was the plan. Craning her neck about, she could make out the stacked formation of the Equestrian Airforce, armor gleaming proudly in the glare of the stationary sun. They would make Equestria proud, no matter the cost (one that Spitfire was sure would be too high).

"All wings, stand by to fire." A timer appeared in the lower left of her HUD, ticking down as the griffon horde bore down upon them. "LIGHTNING-one-one, Fox-three."

Once more the sky filled with missile contrails, going the opposite direction this time, with much more solid targeting data. Spitfire's armor shuddered again as another LRSM left the rail, speeding off into the sky. "All units break left, let's see if they take the bait."

\*\*\*\*\*

The air was stale and stagnant inside the crew compartment of the tank. Staff Sergeant of the Equestrian Royal Army Sweetie Belle sighed, fidgeting in her chair. It was starting to chafe her. "Dumb fabric" she cursed.

"It was made by the lowest bidder" her gunner, Specialist Sunny Days remarked "Not exactly good fabric."

"I know, but you would think they would put more effort into something as critical as a chair." All of this was, of course, an attempt to distract her crew from how crazy what they were doing actually was. Sweetie Belle should have known better, one of those universal rules of being a soldier was never be the first to volunteer for something, but when the Supreme Commander asked the army for volunteers, she had assumed it would be something sensible, now she was starting to question Rainbow Dash's sanity.

They were sitting about 5,000 meters off the ground, atop a cloud. Thanks to Twilight's incredible ability they were able to lift the better part of an armored BCT up, cloudwalking spell turning the stratocumulus cloud into an airborne fortress. The problem was, tanks weren't meant to fly. If it worked, it would be amazing.

Sweetie Belle looked out the commander's periscope, bumping up the magnification. She could just make out the distant form of the pegasi, swooping gracefully on themselves and appearing to retreat in a haphazard, disorderly manner. Sweetie Belle cursed in surprise as one passed in front of her scope,

momentarily filling the screen, they were cutting in too close to the clouds. Just like them damn cocky flyboys to mess this up.

"Gunner" Sweetie Belle barked out "Set load queue, three HVAP, two canister." The main battle tank of the Equestrian army was an impressive piece of work, squat, quad-tracked vehicle with a mechanical autoloader and the full suite of sensors and protection packages. Her main gun was a lethal 150mm smooth-bore gun, originally intended for breaching walls, but equally effective against armor. If Sweetie Belle had her math right, by the time they fired the third AP round, the enemy would be close enough for the canister round to work.

The radio suddenly squawked, the voice of the Supreme Commander instantly grabbing everyone's attention. "All wings, all wings, go to phase two, fire plan Thunderhead."

Sweetie Belle set up in surprise. "Gunner, stand by to fire." Sweetie Belle watched the radar repeater with anticipation; sure enough, the Griffons were scything down on them as hard as possible, apparently unaware of the tanks hidden behind a layer of deceptive electronic warfare.

Below her, the autoloader went to work. Hydraulics purred as the massive 150mm round was brought up from the magazine, dropping onto the load tray. Another ram came up behind the shell, shoving it home into the chamber with a great *click-clack*. The breech swung shut; the gun was ready to fire. Sweetie Belle watched her gunner work, tail twitching as she concentrated, picking out a target. Speeding along at a little bit below mach 1, the Griffon had no idea what was coming. It was pushing the limits of the system to track such a fast target, but it could handle it.

"Target acquired!" Sunny Days announced.

"Fire!" Sweetie Belle ordered.

"Shot over!" The gunner announced, squeezing the trigger. The earth-shattering explosion rattled the tank as the gun fired, the lacking traction of the cloud surface allowing them to skid backwards nearly a meter. She watched through her scope as the tracer round arced through the air with an orange glow, thirty of its fellows joining it in flight. The lead elements of the griffons never saw it coming; the hypersonic anti-armor rounds slammed into them, going right through them and sending those unlucky enough to be hit (or what little was left of them) spiraling to the ground. Three more salvos of HVAP raced out, equally finding their targets. Confusion shattered the griffons ranks, some evading wildly in hope of avoiding the death racing towards them from the clouds like so many lightning bolts, others broke downward, intending to swoop down upon the tanks.

Sweetie Belle watched, mouth agape at the destruction. She had seen much since the war started, a whole lot more death than she ever wanted to see, but nothing matched what happened next. Anti-personnel canister rounds were certainly nasty pieces of technology; tungsten ball-bearings jacketed inside a metal tube effectively turning the tank's gun into the world's biggest shotgun. Sweetie Belle doubted the griffons had ever seen anything like it either. As the first volley went downrange, it tore through their ranks, shredding wings, lacerating torsos, decapitating those unfortunate enough to take a hit to the head; flight armor was meant to withstand the comparatively light fragments of a



missile, not these massive clouds of projectiles.

A force of damn near three-hundred griffons had entered the clouds, only a hundred badly wounded Griffons remained.

Sweetie Belle felt slightly nauseous.

\*\*\*\*\*

Gilda blinked in surprise. Were her systems malfunctioning? What happened to her forces? Despair took control as she realized what had happened. *Something* hidden inside the clouds had just neutralized about half of the Griffon Confederacy's Air Force.

Breaking into the confusion, the griffon bellowed into her radio "Get out damnit, retreat!"

It was too late.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rainbow Dash actually yelled in glee inside her helmet as she watched the ranks of the Griffons crumble. "Gilda you magnificent bitch, I read your book! All units, All units, turn and engage at will." Clear Skies had proven to be even more successful then she had ever hoped, now they had a chance, a chance to defend their homes and even take the fight to the Griffons. They would not let Celestia down.