*"Prince Discord! You need rise, lest we be overrun!"*

*The serpentine prince lifted himself from the ground as plates from his armor fell to useless scraps. He was spent after having to fight off wave after wave of combatants. They were so close to their final victory, but they had lost so much.*

*Celestia's father, King Solus, had caved into the demand of their subjects: to reclaim the lands of the three tribes. For a long time it had lay abandoned, slowly thawing from the windigos' storms of ice and snow. If they returned, it would all be for naught.*

*The main army marched forth in the previous year - the summer of the rose if he recalled correctly. Spirits were high as they were able to move in uncontested for a long while. But the further they ventured in, the more wary the king became. The changelings were ready for them and they struck from within - revealing their deep entrenchment in the army. They planned it around the cold winter - trapping the remainder in the snows. It wasn't until spring that he and Celestia marched north with additional reinforcements. By then, the King's army was well entrenched as well as almost routed.*

*Now they faced the last hurdle - retaking Trotsyn, capital of the Unicorns almost two hundred years ago. But it was the fiercest resistance they had ever faced. Both sides were wild in their fervor and too stubborn to back down. It would be a fight to the death for sure.*

*He snapped his fingers hoping to do something of use. The road they were on grew teeth, swallowing some of the diving changelings, before they could change course.*

*His guard, Noble Victory was practically dragging him back towards the market district, away from the fiercest part of the battle.*

*"It's a scratch, Victory. No need to rush," Discord muttered.*

*"Nonsense. You know perfectly well that is not a scratch," he countered. "You're about as well off as a pincushion that's been storage for the kitchen knife. By Solus, the Princess will have my head if you go to sleep. Mainly because-"*

"I don't know if I can. Of course..." Discord said. His voice echoed through the empty stone hallway as he dragged himself along the wall. His eyes were clouded over, the mind control magic slowly falling off in a mist behind him. It smelled of lemon, but sizzled the floor like acid before disappearing for good. The serpentine figure slowly rounded the corner, leading upwards to the main hall above.

*"Besides," Noble Victory continued, "You're my best friend. It was the least I could do."*

*They were safe and sound within a small building being used as a forward command post. Celestia paraded around the room in her suit of armor, checking her spear for damage by banging it into the wooden floors.*

*"Is he still in there?" Discord asked, nodding to the closed door.*

*Celestia nodded, her face grim. They both knew what would happen to Cunning if he showed his face again. But at the apex of the battle, he decided to appear, helping to push the changeling King back into the central keep. It*

*was only a matter of time until Equestrian forces breached the walls.*

*The doors swung wide open, followed by the intimidating figure of King Solus. His hooves crunched into the wood, leaving clear hoof marks where he stepped. He shot a small glare back at the newcomer Prince, before walking from the building, armored guard in tow.*

*"A duel," Cunning said. His voice was raspy, as if all the water he had drank had left his body. "Your father is issuing a challenge."*

"It's a death trap... He's a changeling!" Discord yelled. He was nearing the throne room, practically crawling along the wall to move onwards. He needed to see. He needed to see the duel.

The two guards whipped around, as the doors slammed open. Discord's stepped inside. He cast his gaze past the hunched form of the dragon king, still concentrating on the new gem around Dawn's neck.

*"FATHER!" Celestia screamed at the top of her lungs.*

*King Solus had managed to defeat the King of the changelings. But the 'mourning' Queen took the opportunity to return the favor by requesting a moment to see him. A solid spear through the neck quelled King Solus' consciousness, but the explosion soon after ended him for good. No alicorn lived after something like that.*

*The battle turned bloody as ponies lost all sense of decency from such treachery. Changelings had rigged the city to burn. The only saving grace was the few who had the sense to disable as many of the magical traps as possible. The enemy constantly added to the chaos by shifting shapes and attacking. Through the thick smoke they disappeared to attack again.*

*Discord and Cunning were back to back now, fending off attackers as they appeared while healing those they could reach. The brief rest before the duel gave them some of their depleted magic, but it was almost gone now.*

*"Brother!" Discord shouted. He forced the last of the magic he had into a small shield, encompassing the two of them. Attacks rebounded from the shifting light, but it was clear each strike was taking a toll, bringing the serpent down to his knees. "Do something!"*

*Cunning took out seven gems from his pouch and lifted them into the air with his magic. They slowly crushed into one another, melting together, reseating, and falling inwards once again. His voice came as a whisper, but it echoed throughout the battlefield.* **"Vuund."**

*A cold chill ran through Discord's spine as he felt his magic cease. The wave of light hit the rest of the battlefield, pushing the smoke from the city. Fires burnt out and those changelings disguised as ponies immediately lost their disguises. Every being caught within the spell moved as if they were swimming through quicksand. Cunning's eyes glowed a bright white as the magical fuel was sucked from his body.*

*The steady stream of the magic flowing from Cunning stopped with a wave of his hoof. Dropping his halberd from the other he began to guide the bright white void to newer victims. Discord watched, mortified, as it sucked the life out of the nearest changeling, turning its body to ash. Then another.*

*And another.*

*And Another.*

Discord fell to the floor of the main hall and screamed in terror as all the memories began to flood into his brain: the aftermath, taking the throne, and - oh goddesses - causing his own beloved to flee. But it wasn't him.

"IT WASN'T ME!"

*The dust cleared from the spell as he watched the changelings fleeing from the battle. Ponies all around gave a victorious shout. The air seemed painfully cold, as if the elements of nature were scared to breath life back into this place, lest it be utterly destroyed.*

*Discord pushed himself up from the ground, slowly turning his head to face his brother. He looked like he'd been through Tartarus and back.*

*Cuts and scratches lined every part of his body and his grey coat looked looked pale. That is, the parts that weren't soaked in his blood. The red liquid was slowly dripping off of him, even out of his mouth as he panted helplessly. That spell should have killed him.*

*"I hope... I did enough to heal... your wounds, brother," Cunning managed to say. The crystal dropped to the ground and turned to dust upon impact. He offered a hoof to his brother. "I suppose I'll be sleeping for a few days."*

*Discord reached up and grasped his hoof. The whole scene around him froze.*

*"Just as you have been sleeping for more than a thousand years," Cunning smiled. He lifted his brother from the ground, freezing him in a standing position. "I thought it would be appropriate to show you where everything you've just remembered began."*

*Discord continued to stare wide eyed at the alicorn as he paced back and forth. Finally he stopped and pointed at the dusty remains of the crystal.*

*"Vuun. The spell long forgotten in the archives of the great dragon city. A forbidden spell. Unlimited power for a price - your life. That is... Until I modified it. It just goes to show how powerful dragon runes really are. Change a syllable, and the spell changes with it."*

*Discord tried hard to move from the confines of the spell that had overcome him. He thought he was remembering a certain memory - not dreaming of a nightmare.*

*"Complete control. Do you know how that feels?" Cunning chuckled, "Of course you don't really know - you only had some semblance of power while I did all the work. All the prodding in your brain, giving you the suggestions you needed to lead. Destroying your relationship piece by piece so I could take the throne in your place. But it was reckless that I didn't plan as far ahead as I have now. I've waited more than a thousand years, but all the pieces are finally falling into place. Equestria is mine, the griffons fall in line because they fear you - the puppet."*

*Discord managed to make a slight scowl as Cunning laughed to himself. He almost fell to the floor from his wild laughs.*

*"They fear a puppet!" he snorted. Gradually, his laughter slowed and his breathing returned to a steady pace. His smile dropped as he stared into Discord's eyes. "This is how betrayal feels, brother. We made a promise but you brushed me off as if it were nothing. Now that I've turned the world against you, I will simply do the same. Perhaps I can find the heart to forgive you in a thousand years. Or not. It depends on if I feel generous enough to let you continue to keep your life."*

*Discord slowly fell backwards towards the floor. He struggled to stay upright, but he was bound tightly to the*

*air.*

Discord gasped and opened his eyes. He nearly shot up from the floor, but found the edge of a sword against his neck... as well as one next to his head, embedded in the floor.

"How could that be!?"

Discord flicked his eyes to the wielder of the embedded blade. A female gryffon was screaming at the King of dragons. He winced, fearing the customary beating the poor diplomat would receive before being sent back to her kingdoms to be dealt with appropriately.

The King just bowed his head, returning to his work over... a filly? *An alicorn nonetheless,* he thought.

"I told you, Empress Gilda. He is not the monster you think him to be. Merely a puppet for some other pony to commit his crimes."

The dragon guardian above him removed the sword from his neck.

"Who in this world would that be?!"

Discord rose to his feet, brushing the dust of the floor from his body. "My brother."

--*--

Cloud Skimmer flipped the page of her newspaper - the latest copy of The New Yoke Times. The usual celebrity nonsense - new Wonderbolt performances for the massive training effort - and the new order of things were the headlines:

The Princess's coffers were nearly dry after the declaration she made several days ago, an article on the new location for the Running of the Leaves in commemoration of those lost in the attack; they'd be starting in Canterlot Park, one of the few places that had escaped a good amount of damage, and the first session of the Equestrian Senate.

Cloud Skimmer snorted. After the small council of unicorns she gathered the last time, she thought the idea would have been turned down. This time, it was a council with representation from all types of ponies. Based on the size of each city, they would be allowed a certain number of seats.

Normally the nobles would be outraged at such a move. But the remainder of the aristocracy were rather quiet. Few had come out in favor of the idea, to ensure security. If they lost her, nobles would squabble over the right to rule. It would play right into Discord's plan.

"Over here, Storm Surge!"

"Coming!"

Cloud Skimmer looked up from her paper. Out in the yard, Dusk, Early Blaze, and their other friend - a young colt named Storm Surge - were hastily donning their costumes for Nightmare Night. Of course it was a day early, but they were eager to try them on. Storm Surge had on a miniature Wonderbolts uniform, complete with a pair of training goggles. His dark grey mane was nearly swept back over his back and his oddly-colored eyes - navy blue for his left, and forest green for his right - shone against the light blue costume.

Early Blaze had decided to dress up as a rabbit, but was having trouble keeping the ears from flopping on top of her eyes. She kept blowing on them to try to get them out of the way, but she eventually had to move them by hoof, letting them drape down her neck.

Dusk's was by far the most complicated looking one - it almost appeared as though she was wearing armor. Two bandoliers were draped over her back, one on each side, filled with small glass bottles - each a different color from one another.

"Wow! You look like Batmare or something, Dusk," Storm Surge said.

"Thanks, but that's not who I'm being for nightmare night." Dusk removed a potion from the bandolier and placed it on the ground. "I'm being Clover the Clever! Royal Mage of the three tribes. I found out that she was the first royal mage when I was reading about the first settlers of Equestria."

"Oh. Well that's cool too."

"Yeah. Oh! Why don't we show Cheerilee our costumes?" Early Blaze said excitedly.

"Yeah!" the others cheered. They ran into the house, returning some semblance of silence to the backyard.

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Dusk had been surprisingly calm for the while they had spent in Ponyville. Suspiciously so, all things considered. She asked one of the doctors - Nurse Redheart - to take a look at her to make sure she was physically ok, as well as mentally. Her best guess was that she was repressing the memory, or had an impenetrable will. The latter was less likely, but she couldn't shake the feeling that Dusk was hiding something more than mental trauma.

On more than one occasion she heard the filly cry herself to sleep, with alarming frequency as time had gone on. If she had indeed built herself a little world to forget all the bad things, it was fragile. Very fragile.

The door opened once more as Ocean Breeze walked out with a towel around his neck. Big Macintosh followed shortly afterwards, carrying a tray of juice on his back.

"I'm gonna go train for the Running of the Leaves for a bit. Be back in a few hours," Ocean Breeze said, stretching his forelegs in the yard. Big Mac nodded, sending him into a full trot towards the nearby forest.

Big Mac set the tray down on the table. "How're you feelin'?"

"Better. Sore," Cloud Skimmer sighed. "I'd love to slip back into my armor and get back to training, but..."

"You'll reopen that nice gash you got tusslin' with that unicorn."

She looked down at the bandages wrapped around her lower body, careful not to agitate the wound.

"Though I reckon it won't open again since you've been tearing at it all week."

She looked taken aback, blushing almost on reflex. Despite the regular treatments of magic and instructions to take it easy, she had been sneaking out late in the night to practice anyway. The spot she had chosen was a secluded part of the farm with nothing but dead oaks she had chopped to bits with her wings. She kept it close to the Everfree Forest to ensure she could find a stray rain

cloud to wash away all the blood from her injuries. The fact that he knew... was unsettling, to say the least.

"My lips are sealed, no need worryin' over that," he continued. She breathed a sigh of relief. "I wanted to let you know True North is awake."

"He's finally out of that trance?" she asked. He had spent the last week trying to get in touch with Thunder Cloud - or find him if he was gone.

"Thunder Cloud's gone. Got trapped in a cave somewhere."

Cloud Skimmer bowed her head. She didn't know him as well as Granite did, but it hurt her deep down to know. Losing anypony right now was bad, no matter who it was.

"But there's something else. It looks like wherever he ended up, that's where Luna is being imprisoned."

She gasped.

"Which means we'll have to keep searching while protectin' everypony. Goes without sayin', but not a word to anypony but us."

She nodded, "Especially not to the Princess."

He nodded in agreement. Something was off about her, that much they all knew. She never came to take Dusk back - reasonably so, considering the circumstances. But the fact that in so many days, she had not once come to visit Dusk. One simple letter instructing her to keep her safe was all they received.  On top of Dusk's suspicious behavior, she had been on high alert for a while. Alarm bells were going off in her head, but she couldn't find the answers to make them settle down. Something awful was happening, but she couldn't anticipate it. They were in the dark, without a clue, and in the midst of the end of the world.

*What could possibly be going on?* She thought.