

## Memories of Days Long Past: Session 24

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Midnight, Themis, Ambrosia, Luna, Celesia, and Lycoris all made their way through the underground corridors of the cathedral, barely speaking a word the whole way. Every time Midnight, Luna, or Celestia tried to ask something, they were hushed down by Ambrosia or given a cryptic non-answer from Lycoris, causing the lot of them to just keep their mouths zipped tight the whole way down. It frustrated Midnight to say the least.

They made no attempt to disguise their hoofsteps, so it was no surprise that the ponies within the dungeon could hear them coming from many meters away. Gnosis smirked at the five ponies kept under his jurisdiction. "I wonder what sentence they determined for you ponies..."

Amethyst held Lily close to her body as if she was trying to protect her, with the other ponies crowding around them in a defensive stance. Gnosis chuckled. "Isn't this cute... the prisoners think they can protect themselves from their fates..."

The dungeon door swung open and the six other ponies made their way into the crowded room. Themis and Ambrosia stood at the center, Luna at her mother's side and Celestia at her father's. Further to the border was Gnosis to Celestia's side and Midnight and Lycoris to Luna's side, the ring of ponies surrounding the five prisoners huddled in the middle of the room. The prisoners made eye-contact as they looked to Midnight and Luna for help, hoping that they managed to convince King Themis that they were innocent.

"So we meet again," Themis grumbled, gesturing towards Skyline and Cinnamon. "You two certainly haven't changed from our encounter in Gyren... and Miss Lily was it?" he asked, turning to the yellow pegasus hidden underneath Amethyst. "You act with so much more grace than those two ruffians did the other day... shame you were roped into treason."

"We have nothing to do with any sort of treason!" Amethyst defended. "It was all just a misunderstanding!"

An expression of displeasure flashed itself across Themis's face. He wasn't used to his subjects talking back to him, and he certainly didn't like it. He wiped that expression off his face before confronting the fashionista. "Why hello there, I don't believe we have met, Miss...?"

"Amethyst," the unicorn answered with a slight tinge of fear in her voice.

"Amethyst, eh..." Themis repeated as if he was rolling the name around his tongue. "And what about you?" he asked, gesturing towards the pink pony.

"I'm Pastel Lollipop!" Pastel answered enthusiastically.

Themis couldn't help but show a slight smile that he quickly wiped away. There was just something about Pastel that had that kind of effect on others. Ambrosia, on the other hand, smiled freely at the pink pony. "It's nice to meet you Miss Lollipop."

"Shame such a nice pony is accused of being a traitor," Themis said, narrowing his eyes.

"So, *Your Highness*," Skyline said bitterly, trying her best to keep her temper in check. "What's going on? Are we off the hook or what?"

"You would do best to be respectful around the one who'll determine your sentence," Themis growled. He turned to the professor. "Tell me Gnosis, what is your opinion on these ponies?"

Gnosis chuckled at the king's question. "These ponies are ill-mannered, hot-tempered ruffians who quite obviously represent their backwater heritage. If it were up to me I'd keep them confined to whence they came." The open insult to the ponies caused Skyline to reflexively clench her hoof. "But!" Gnosis suddenly said, interrupting the cyan pegasus's prepared retort. "But... I don't believe that they knowingly committed crimes of treason against the State. Masterminding such a task would be beyond the capabilities of their primitive intellects."

"Primitive?!" Amethyst objected. "Well I have never been so insulted as to—wait... what?" Her anger was replaced by confusion as she realized what the elder stallion just said. Was he... defending them?

"They're foolishly innocent and probably can't even go more than three steps without having the wool pulled over their eyes," Gnosis continued. "They'd probably trust a wolf if it gave them a convincing enough sob story, so it's not a surprise that Deneb got these halfwits to do his bidding. If anything, they should be charged for crimes of utter stupidity!"

The five prisoners stared at the elderly stallion, their mouths agape. They wouldn't have thought after all this time that the pony who had oppressed and abused them would end up trying to liberate them.

Themis mulled over Gnosis's testimony, kneading his brow in thought. A tense atmosphere settled over everypony as the king thought, leaving each of them anxiously waiting for Themis's decree. Each of them except for two.

Gnosis stood to the side, yawning. He played his part, and it didn't really seem to matter to him which side of the coin the ponies' fates rested on. Lycoris had the same expression, however... there was something... off about it. At first glance he looked detached from the scene, his eyes wandering around the room in what seemed like boredom. But just past the surface... his eyes held a completely different expression. It looked like he already knew what the outcome of this meeting would be, and he was looking toward an encounter that stood farther along the future

than this one. It seemed to him that the fate of this meeting had been predetermined beforehand.

It was a look that nobody physically present in the room could notice or understand. Only the silent observers took note of this through another's eyes.

The king suddenly opened his mouth and uttered two words. "I see."

These two simple words the king uttered pushed the ponies to the edge. What did he see? Did he see that they were all innocent? Or did he still see them as criminals and was going to sentence them to life in prison?

Themis slowly looked over each of the five ponies, gauging their reactions. Their faces held a mix of fear, tension, and apprehension. But above all... their eyes contained genuine innocence.

"It is a fact," Themis said quietly, "that your actions have put my daughter in mortal peril. It is also a fact that you all acted as accomplices for a traitor, even if you were truly unaware of his identity." The ponies stayed silent, knowing that the king wasn't finished yet. "However... ignorance should not be considered a crime worth capital punishment. I trust Professor Gnosis's judgment, and as of this moment... I will decide to give you five ponies the benefit of the doubt. Your freedom from this dungeon is secured."

The ponies suddenly broke out in laughter. Wide smiles erupted from their faces and they embraced each other in relief.

They were free.

Midnight galloped over to join the merriment of the rest of her friends. "I'm so glad you girls are off the hook!" she cried, tears of joy falling from her eyes as she jumped into the group hug.

"There ain't no way we'd be locked away forever!" Cinnamon laughed.

Luna and Celestia trotted over to the pile of ponies. "It's nice to see that the charges are dropped," the elder sister said. "It'd be a shame to see such good ponies unjustly punished."

"Yeah..." Luna said, relieved. "I'm glad my stupidity didn't get you all in too much trouble..."

Pastel giggled. "Only good things happen to good ponies!"

Lily smiled softly. "Yeah... good things..." The smile slowly faded from her face as her eyes caught sight of the ponies that stood at the side.

Gnosis and Ambrosia stood quietly behind the king, who looked like he still had more to say. But

behind them, the scarlet stallion was making his way out of the room. Lycoris paused just short of the door, noticing Lily's eyes fixated on him. He turned around, showing the pegasus a slight expression of sadness.

"Eek!" Lily let out a small gasp of discomfort, too soft to be heard over the gaiety of her friends. It felt like something just pierced into her mind, opening her consciousness to the world around her.

*I'm sorry...* a voice echoed within her mind. Startled, Lily flinched, causing her friends to take notice of her discomfort.

"You alright, darling?" Amethyst asked. "We weren't holding you too tightly, were we?"

*You probably would have been better off locked away down here to be honest...* the voice said. *I apologize in advance Lily... for everything...*

The realization hit Lily as soon as the door quietly shut itself, confining her consciousness within the reaches of her own mind. *Lycoris... why are you apologizing?*

"Um... Lily? Are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh!" Lily shook herself back into reality, noticing her friends giving her a worried look. "I-I'm fine..."

"Are you sure, Lily?" Pastel asked, a frown plastered on her face. "You looked all spacey and out of it... are you still aching from the pains from earlier?"

Lily forced a smile, not wanting to worry her friends. "No... I'm fine, don't worry..." Once she got the chance, she needed to ask Lycoris what that was all about...

King Themis suddenly spoke up. "I loathe interrupting the happiness of my subjects, but it appears that you're all done celebrating so..."

Midnight snapped to attention. "What is it, father?"

The stallion sighed. "I may have decided to release you from this dungeon... but that doesn't mean that I'm completely dropping all your charges."

The smiles instantly dropped from all of their faces. "What the heck is up with that?!" Skyline yelled.

"This isn't fair!" Luna cried out. "You said it yourself that you're letting them go! Doesn't that mean you think of them as innocent?!"

“Innocence can be feigned,” Themis explained quietly. “You ponies might all very well be completely innocent, but on the other hand you all could be experts of deception.”

Cinnamon yanked on Skyline’s tail before the cyan pegasus could throw another outburst at the monarch. “If ya don’t mind me askin’,” Cinnamon said, looking Themis directly in the eye, “can ya be straight with what yer gonna do with us now?”

Themis nodded. “I’m sure you’ve all heard the expression ‘actions speak louder than words.’ If I was a king who let himself be swayed by mere discourse, then I would’ve been fooled long ago by the Ambassadors of neighboring territories. A silver tongue can only get you so far in life you see.” He paused and made sure that everypony was giving him their full attention. “So... until you prove to me beyond reasonable doubt that you are loyal to the State, you must all have an escort with you at all times.”

“You’re putting them on probation?” Midnight asked quietly.

“Yes I am, my child,” Themis answered. “If their escorts even catch the slightest hint of disloyalty or rebellion... they’ll have permission to execute them on the spot.”

Skyline ground her teeth together. “I can’t believe it... you’re still suspicious of us?!”

“Calm down Skyline!” Amethyst said firmly. “Think about it for a moment... we may be kept under watch, but we’ll be plenty freer then we would have been if we were sentenced to be locked in this dreary dungeon for the rest of our lives!”

“Hmph,” Gnosis grunted, making his first sound in a while. “At least one of you has sense. You’re all getting out of here with your lives intact, be thankful for that and stop complaining.” He lifted himself off of the wall he had been leaning on and threw open the door. “I’ve wasted enough time here. If you’ll excuse me Your Highness, but I have to attend to... certain duties if you will. I’ll send him down once I’ve got him prepared, Your Highness.” Themis gave a curt nod to the professor, who gave a quick bow before exiting and shutting the door behind him.

“... he’s right, everypony,” Celestia muttered. “Even if you all are on prohibition, you’ll all still be pretty much able to live your own lives. You’re all honest ponies, so the worse-case scenario is that you’ll each be stuck with a constant companion. And that’s not so bad, is it?”

“Correction,” Themis cut in, “not ‘each.’ They’ll only have two escorts assigned to them.” He ran his eyes over the symbols that rested on all of their flanks. “They have magic now... there are only two ponies that I trust to be able to handle magical anomalies. Of course since there are only two of them, your five can’t wander about separately anymore...”

“So we’re stuck together?” Lily murmured. “I-I mean, not that I really mind but...”

Themis opened his mouth to answer, but Pastel got to speaking first. "It's only until we prove that we're innocent beyond reasonable doubt!" she answered enthusiastically. "Weren't you listening, silly?"

Themis sighed. He hated being beaten to the punch. "I'm going to overlook that misstep... but yes, she's correct. This is only a temporary measure until your actions show to me that you all are loyal to the State."

"Then how exactly are we supposed to prove ourselves innocent?" Amethyst asked.

"It's simple really," Themis spoke. "To prove that you're all not traitors, turn in the pony who put you all into this position in the first place."

The ponies stood silent for a moment, realizing what they'd have to do to clear their names. Luna gave voice these thoughts, speaking shakily. "A-are you asking them to capture Deneb and bring him to his execution?"

They collectively winced at the word 'execution,' Midnight turning to face the king in shock. "Execution?!"

Themis waved a hoof, dismissing the word. "I am not a tyrant; even a traitor like him will get a chance to present his case before me. Besides... a pony with abilities like his would be almost impossible to truly replace."

"*Truly* replace?" Cinnamon repeated. "Are ya talkin' about those Catalyst things ya'll need?"

"Heh, so the professor has seen it fit to impart that information onto you ponies," Themis chuckled. "A fitting choice, considering your new abilities. But yes, the Day of Ascension was designed to be carried out with three Catalysts. Vega, sadly, is no longer with us, but even with her absence two should be enough. Which is why we need Deneb... alive."

"And just what're you gonna do with Deneb once the Ascension's over?" Skyline asked suspiciously.

For the first time, a genuine smile cracked itself upon Themis's face. "There are no criminals in Paradise. Once the Ascension is carried out, everypony will live happily, free from the despairs of the world."

A faint glare of suspicion still existed on each of the five ponies' expressions, but it was hard to maintain in the face of the pure smile that the king radiated. The Paradise of the Ascension... freedom from the wolves, freedom from sadness, it was something everypony dreamed of after all.

"I say we help find Deneb," Pastel suddenly said.

Her friends looked back at her with questioning looks. "What makes you say that...?" Lily asked.

Pastel shrugged. "I dunno. But for some reason I feel like everything is a misunderstanding... I don't think Deneb is a mean pony, so there's no way he was the one who hurt the ponies who came after him! Maybe if we just talk to him again then we can clear everything up and then everything will be all peachy keen!"

Ambrosia giggled, the first sound that she had uttered inside of the dungeon. "My my, you're certainly an optimistic one," she told Pastel, smiling. "That's good, we need more ponies like you in this dark world of ours."

Themis paused for a moment and turned to his wife. "Say... why don't you go on ahead and take Celestia and Luna back up to their chambers? I think they've had enough of this dreary place."

Luna puffed out her cheeks in defiance. "I don't wanna leave yet!"

Celestia stealthily nudged her sister and hissed in her ear. "Stop being so disobedient, Luna!"

"No fighting, girls!" Themis bellowed. "We'll be out of here shortly, I'm just asking you three to go on ahead of us." Luna continued to glare at her father, not wanting to budge. Themis sighed. "You have my word Luna, these ponies won't have to see these walls anytime in the near future."

That statement of reassurance was enough for Luna, as a large smile broke out on her face. "Good!" she cried happily. She turned towards the other ponies. "I'll see you all later then!"

Ambrosia took her daughters under her hoof and ushered them out of the room, leaving the king alone with Midnight and the Ponyvillians.

"Before I allow you all to leave," Themis spoke, "let me reiterate the terms of release. You all will enjoy the previous freedoms you had before this whole mess, and as long as you all are well behaved, you'll never have to suffer anything more than a lack of privacy from the two escorts who will keep watch of you all at all times. Whether or not you all decide to search for Deneb though is up to you."

"I'm not really looking forward to a life of having somepony constantly looking over my shoulder," Skyline said dryly. "And Pastel has a point. Maybe we will go out and find Deneb for you."

"As I said, whether or not you do is your choice," Themis reiterated.

“So who are our escorts then?” Midnight asked.

“Lycoris is one of them, obviously,” Themis told her. “I know you’re trained to handle magic anomalies too, Midnight, but considering how close you are to the escorts... well, you understand.”

Midnight grimaced. Lycoris again! How does somepony get so highly ranked without her even knowing about his existence?! She tried her best to hide her annoyance when addressing her father once again. “And... this second pony...?”

“A certain hothead who I think might go well with this one here,” Themis chuckled, gesturing towards Skyline. “I believe you two have met once before?”

Skyline looked confused at the monarch for a moment, before an expression of understanding dawned on her face. “Oh Goddess... not that guy...”

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“I have to babysit these foals?!”

After what seemed like forever, Skyline, Cinnamon, Amethyst, Lily, and Pastel were finally outside of the dreary underground prison and back in the radiant sunlight, standing in the outdoor training grounds at one of the roofs of the castle along with Midnight and Themis. Standing in front of the ponies was a silver earth pony cloaked in armor, his forehead soaked with the sweat resulting from a long day of training. A longsword stuck out of dirt next to him, the weapon he was practicing with just moments before he was interrupted.

“Is this how the captain of the Royal Guard should be addressing his king?” Themis asked with faint displeasure in his tone. “I expected better from you, Captain Ares.”

Ares grimaced, the displeasure readily apparent in his face. “I apologize, my liege. You know that I’ll take on any duty you assign to me without fail. But... you can’t be serious about this, can you? I have better things to do than to look after a bunch of foals!”

“This guy really gets on my nerves...” Skyline muttered harshly under her breath.

Cinnamon nudged the cyan pegasus. “Just bear with it, okay?” she hissed. The six ponies were told to keep silent until the arrangements for their escorts have been made, an order that Skyline found hard to follow.

“Can’t you get somepony else to do this?” Ares continued, not hearing Skyline’s objections. “You know how many responsibilities I have with my troops; if at all possible I’d like to respectfully decline your request!”

“This is not a request, but an order.” Themis leaned in towards Ares’s ear, not wanting to be overheard by any of the other guardponies. “Do you see those symbols on their flanks? You do know what that means, right?”

Ares looked towards the other ponies for the first time, his eyes widening as he noticed the Destiny Marks. “Oh you have *got* to be kidding me...!”

“You’re the only pony who’s been trained to handle these types of situations,” Themis told him. “And I need to make sure these ponies don’t go rogue.”

“Lady Midnight can handle them, can’t she?” Ares asked, his voice begging not to be assigned this duty.

Midnight’s ears perked up at the mention of her name, but her father spoke before she was able to. “She has the ability, but not the will,” Themis explained, causing Midnight’s ears to droop. “Above all, their escorts have to be rational and impartial, one quality of which my daughter lacks.”

Ares raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me, escorts? As in... more than one?” He frowned. “I know I’ve been complaining about this position... but may you inform me on who else is qualified for this job aside from me and Lady Midnight?”

“A clergypony named Lycoris,” Themis said simply.

“A *clergypony*?” Ares repeated incredulously. “I’m sorry, but I find it hard to believe that a clergypony would be able to do anything other than sit around and pray to the Goddess. How is this pony supposed to keep things under control?”

“If you value your position, you would do best not to delve too deeply into his secrets,” Themis warned. “All you need to know is that he’s qualified for the job, got it?” Ares gave a quick salute in response, to which Themis nodded. “Good. I’ll be taking my leave now. Lycoris will join you once he is able, Captain Ares.”

“Yes, my liege!” Ares gave another salute.

Themis turned to the six ponies before he departed for the throne room. “Some words of advice for you all before I leave you to your own devices: Your new abilities are not something to be trifled with.” He shifted his eyes towards Midnight. “Be sure to educate your friends on how to control their magic. Nothing is more dangerous than a rogue mage.”

Midnight nodded. “Yes father, I’ll tell them what they need to know.”

“That includes you too, Midnight,” Themis said ominously. “Just ask your friends Cinnamon or Skyline about what happened back in Gyren.” He glanced over the other five ponies. “I have my suspicions on how the others acquired their abilities, but I know for certain that your talent is the real thing. If you’re not careful, you’ll become nothing more than a ticking time-bomb just waiting to go off.”

The warning sent a shiver down Midnight’s spine. “Y-yes father... I’ll keep that in mind...”

Themis smiled. “Good. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of other business to attend to.” He swiftly turned his back on the ponies and trotted back into the castle to resume his kingly duties.

“And now I’m stuck with you foals,” Ares grumbled. “Just great. *Terrific*. I’m so happy I can cry.”

“It’s not like we like it any better,” Skyline responded in the same tone of voice. “We don’t need some lunkhead to drag us down.”

“Okay, who wants some lunch?!” Cinnamon said loudly, trying to defuse the sparks between the two ponies. “Now that ah think about it, what time is it anyways? We’ve been down in that there dungeon for so long ah’ve lost track o’ time!”

“It’s a few hours past noon,” Ares answered briskly, breaking eye-contact with Skyline. “Just about time for me to dismiss the afternoon practice.” He glared at his new charges before he violently yanked his longsword out of the ground, the tip of it just narrowly missing Amethyst.

“H-hey!” Amethyst yelped, reflexively jumping back in surprise. “Just what do you think you’re doing you ruffian?!”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” Ares said bitterly. “We’ll all get along fine as long as none of you get on my bad side. And as far as things go right now, you ponies are already getting pretty close towards there.” He paused. “Lady Midnight excluded of course.” Before anypony could say something, Ares galloped off to the crowd of soldiers, barking orders at them.

“Ugh, he’s such a creep...” Skyline muttered under her breath. “I can’t believe we’re stuck with him...”

“I’m sure he’ll warm up to us...” Lily said shyly.

“I agree!” Pastel chirped. “Nopony can be that grumpy-wumpy forever!”

“Ah dunno,” Cinnamon frowned. “Ah’ve met plenty of ponies who ah’ve never seen smile.”

“He almost chopped my mane off!” Amethyst cried. “My beautiful, beautiful mane!”

Midnight sighed and turned to face her friends. "Look... he may be a bit abrasive... but Ares is one of the most trustworthy ponies in Canterlot. So don't give him too much trouble, okay...?"

"I'll give him trouble if he gives me trouble," Skyline grunted.

"Don't be like that," Midnight said, giving the cyan pegasus a weak smile. "I'm sure everything will be fine!"

"Alright," Ares barked as he rejoined the group, "quit your yappin' and tell me why the hell you're all up here and not locked away in that dungeon!" Ares barked as he rejoined the group.

Skyline's eye twitched. "Yeah... everything'll be just great..."