

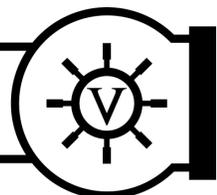
Mendacity

Dromicosuchus

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PONY FICTION VAULT



It was not a particularly elegant house, shunted away from the sunny open space around town hall and squeezed somewhat guiltily into the shadows of larger, older, more dignified homes—homes with pedigrees, homes that housed respectable ponies with respectable saddlebags filled with respectable bits—but inelegant as it might have been, it was clearly loved. The whitewashed walls were flawless and smooth, the small round windows with their robin’s egg blue curtains were spotless, the unchipped shingles were all present and accounted for, and the little window boxes flourished with wild herbs and flowers gathered from the Everfree and beyond, healthy but disciplined. No vines were permitted to crawl up these perfect walls, tearing at the plaster with their insidious little holdfasts, and woe betide the flower that tried to reassert its wildness, smudging the window glass with dirty yellow pollen. These visitors from the strange eerie Wild were welcome here, but only as long as they remembered that they were no longer in the Wild. There was a price for everything, and if they wanted to be watered and fertilized, kept free of aphids and Nippony beetles, then they had to pay it.

For the moment, though, they were unwatched, and perhaps as the pale yellow earth pony within the house rummaged through the chest by the neat yellow front door, her attention momentarily occupied, some of the bolder ones were already making plans to send a rogue runner crawling along the forbidden plaster wall. The mare raised herself up from the chest, tossed a scarf back inside with an irritated snort, and called, “Lyra!”

The name came out in a deep, basso rumble, like the voice of some senior and dignified toad trying to be even more senior and dignified than usual. The mare winced. That had been *completely* off; she was usually able to manage something at least vaguely normal. She cleared her throat, and tried again.

“Lyra! Sorry about that, it’s me, Bon Bon. Have you seen my saddlebag?”

The voice was still a little deeper than she would have liked, and there was a bizarre Manehattan accent layered over it—why did that keep happening? She’d never even been to Manehattan—but at least it was feminine. There was a clacking and clattering from somewhere below, a dull thud, and then, filtering up through the wooden floor, a muffled but distinct “Awww!” Bon Bon smiled, trotted over to the deep blue cellar door—a little scratched, she’d need to pick up some sandpaper and paint on her way back—and nudged it open with a gentle kick of her hoof.

The cellar was, as always, in a state of mild chaos; this was Lyra’s lair, and it showed. Tools and sheet music lay scattered about on the flagstones of the floor, the walls were

covered with posters and diagrams, and a good third of the room was completely taken up by the hulking thicket of copper pipes, repurposed lyre strings, cogs, and gears that Lyra called her “fing-er,” designed to give her a set of artificial, opposable claws, like those of a dragon—ostensibly to make it easier for her to play her lyre, but Bon Bon suspected that it ran a little deeper than that, particularly considering Lyra’s current attempts to miniaturize the fing-er so that, as she put it, “I could fing all over the place! Anytime I want! I could just trot to the marketplace and if I see something I want, FING! I just *pick it up!* Just like that! Just like that, Bon Bon!” She had never really been able to explain where her word “fing” had come from; it just felt right, she said.

Lyra was currently sprawled on her back on the cellar floor, hind limbs waving awkwardly in the air and forehooves crossed peevishly. As Bon Bon trotted down the wooden steps, her marefriend said, “I don’t know where your saddlebag is; just use mine. And the hay did you have to shout like that for? You broke my concentration; I almost had it this time!”

Bon Bon helped her to her hooves. “I’m sorry, sweetie, I didn’t know you were practicing. Did you manage a step?” There, her voice this time was practically normal. The Fancy accent was new, though.

Lyra’s irritation disappeared like a pie in a parasprite colony. “A step? Filly, hold on to your saddlebag, ‘cause I am like way more awesome than that now. I didn’t just step, I walked, Bon Bon! On my hind legs! I walked!” She reared up and wrapped her forelimbs around her marefriend, hugging her gleefully.

“Lyra, that’s fantastic! All that practice, finally paying off! Didn’t I tell you you could do it?”

The pale green unicorn lowered herself to her hooves again. “Well, sure, but after all those tries—I was starting to get a little discouraged, honestly. But you were right, all those times; I could do it! I *did* do it! All those late night balance sessions, every time we worked on my pose...” She paused, and then in a softer tone of voice added, “I couldn’t have done it without you, you know. I just—I couldn’t have done it.”

“Oh sweetie, I just encouraged. This is your victory.” Bon Bon smiled. “And it needs to be celebrated! What would you say to a dinner out on the town? Horte Cuisine’s new place, maybe? A romantic dinner for two, under the stars?”

“He charges a lot of bits, though, doesn’t he? Do you think we can afford...?”

“Shush, now! What’s the use of having bits if we don’t spend them on something fun now and again? I’m going out this afternoon to get some rennet apples from Sweet Apple Acres and pick some marsh mallow for that *pâte de guimauve* recipe I’ve been wanting to try, and I’ll stop by *La Musette D’Avoine* to make the reservation while I’m out. Does that sound good?”

Lyra’s brow furrowed. “Well, yeah, but...marsh mallow? Doesn’t that only grow in Froggy Bottom Bog?”

“I’ll be careful, dear heart; aren’t I always? I’ve always come back safe before. Besides, I think a lot of the stories are exaggerated.”

“The hydra isn’t an exaggeration. The Cakes’ apprentice told me that she was nearly eaten by it—er, them once.”

“The Cakes’ apprentice also thinks that she can foresee the future and that she and her friends are constantly being watched by an audience of millions of hairless monkeys. I’d take anything she says with a pinch of salt, if I were you.”

“Granny Smith’s granddaughter saw them too, though, and she’s generally really dependable.”

“Well, even if there is a hydra there, they won’t be awake so soon after Winter Wrap Up; cold-blooded, you know. Don’t fret, sweetie; I promise I’ll be just fine.”

“Well, okay. But don’t you dare get eaten, you hear? And if you start to feel...odd, come back right away. I can’t do without you; I really love you, you know.”

Bon Bon nuzzled Lyra’s mane. “I know. I’ll be careful.” She climbed the cellar stairs, gave her marefriend a reassuring wave, retrieved Lyra’s saddlebag from its usual resting place (wedged under the chest of drawers in their bedroom), and trotted out of the house. As the door shut behind her, she paused for a moment, and glancing back murmured, “Believe me, sweetie, I know.”

• • •

The shadows had grown longer, but dusk was still some hours off yet. Water squelched up around Bon Bon’s hooves as the sphagnum moss strewn across the marshy ground sank beneath her weight. There weren’t “paths,” per se, here; few ponies came this way, largely because, not so long ago when Ponyville was a younger settlement and the Everfree was still putting up more than a token resistance to the interlopers, few ponies

came back. It was still a dangerous place, but Bon Bon was more familiar with it than most who knew her would have guessed. She was not proud of this familiarity, and there were times, when the sun shone down bright and the laughing of foals at play filtered up from the lane in front of their home, that she tried to pretend to herself that all the old familiarity was dead, and that if she ever dared to wander too far from the borders of town her chances of survival would be just as slight as those of any other pony—any normal pony.

There were other times, though, when the lies she told herself weakened, and when the crisp, restrained order of their neat little home seemed to lose its solidity. When the sun had set and the moon was nothing more than a thin scimitar's-edge of light in the sky, when the wind blew wildly and the rain lashed against the windows, when the world grew eerie and that eeriness hissed and hummed its shadowed way along ancient paths that, though they had been long since paved over and civilized, and seemed quite dead in the light of the sun, still retained a hidden life of their own—then, sometimes her marefriend would be woken by the sound of hooves against wooden planks as Bon Bon paced the floors of their solid safe little home, or by the shivering of Bon Bon's cold body against Lyra's own as she whimpered with her eyes clenched shut. Lyra had long since cottoned on to the fact that, whatever caused these fits, Bon Bon wasn't able to explain them, and when they struck Lyra did her best to comfort her marefriend, and didn't pester her with questions after they had passed. Bon Bon was grateful to her for that.

It hadn't been much of a problem lately, though; it had been months, indeed, since the last fit, and she had made it through last midsummer's eve (usually a very hard time for her) with only a general sense of unease. She hadn't slept at all that night, of course, and Lyra had had to stop her once or twice from wandering out into the night, but compared to what midsummer's eve was usually like, that was nothing. Yes, all things considered, a little trip to Froggy Bottom Bog was well within her comfort zone. She pushed a dangling sheet of matted moss out of her way, and stepping out of the shadows of the low, gnarled swamp trees she gingerly made her way to the water's edge, alert for any sounds beneath the constant croaking of frogs and droning of insects that might herald danger. She scanned the shoreline. White flowers, a stalk as tall as she was—they ought to be easy to spot. It had been too long since she had been here; the swamp had been steadily receding for years thanks to the Ponyville dam, and as the water lowered the plants had followed it, leaving her old mental map of the area useless. Still, there was bound to be some marsh mallow still growing somewhere in the area, possibly at one of the other lakes in the bog. She was about to turn and head back under the trees when she heard, or felt—there wasn't much of a distinction, not in this place—something moving far out in the thick green waters of the bog.

Bon Bon's first thought, that it was the hydra awake earlier in the season than was usual for them, she quickly dismissed; whatever it was, it wasn't nearly that large. She could see the ripples in the distance now, the lazy, curving deltas in the water as the dark form beneath coiled its way towards where she stood on the shore. It would have been wisest, she knew, to gallop away. She had been doing so well lately, though, and surely she could resist; surely she was strong enough now. So instead of running, she stood and waited.

The creature came to a halt not far from shore, the water rippling above it, and then with a slow, easy grace it reared up above the surface, mist clinging to its body as it rose. It—he—was a stallion, or looked like it, and he was handsome beyond belief. His legs were long, thin, and perfectly formed, his barrel-like body banded with powerful muscles, his neck arching up in a graceful curve, and his long, powerful snout perfect in every way. He moved deliberately, beautifully, and as he reared up, his mane swirling about him and casting sparkling droplets of water to all sides, he seemed to radiate an overwhelming aura of strength and majesty. Only his eyes were not quite perfect, irises slitted like those of a goat and quite unlike any stallion's that Bon Bon had ever seen. He plunged down to all four hooves in the shallow water, and turning his magnificent head to Bon Bon he spoke in a voice like mulled wine made audible, rich and resonant.

“O queen of mares, luckiest of the lucky and wisest of the wise, long have I been imprisoned in this lake, despairing that any passer-by would ever come my way. Come to me and lay but the very tip of your hoof against my flank, and I shall be free from my curse and forever indebted to you. All your wishes I will make true, and all your desi—”

Bon Bon snorted. “It's me, Aldrovanda.”

The stallion blinked. “What?”

“It's me. Remember? We last talked a few years ago, I think.”

“But—I don't—I didn't—we did?”

Bon Bon sighed, closed her eyes, and concentrated. She hadn't done this in ages, but it was still second nature to her—or, technically, first nature. Green light flickered for a moment from behind her closed eyelids. She blinked once or twice, and then raised her head to stare at the stallion with piercingly blue, crystalline eyes, pupil-less and tessellated with minute ocelli: a changeling's eyes. He started, and then smiled a horribly sharp-fanged smile.

“Mendax! It has been ages! How have you been keeping, you shifty little renegade? Still playing the mare in that interlopers’ colony, I take it?” As he spoke, the stallion’s voice smoothly rose, losing its resonance and becoming weedy and shrill. His muscles withered, his—her snout smoothed and shortened to a mare’s snout, and her mane became greener and rougher until it looked like nothing so much as a long tangled thatch of sphagnum moss, waterwheel, and bladderwort, clinging to a skeletal black body.

Bon Bon frowned. “I’m still in Ponyville, yes. And please don’t call me that; I dislike it just as much now as I did then.”

“Pfeh, you honestly prefer Dum Dum to your given name?”

“Bon Bon.”

“Right, sorry, that was it.” Aldrovanda cocked her head to one side. “Do pardon me for the personal question, but is there any particular reason your voice just soared a few dozen registers? Is this some new fashion trend amongst changelings that I should be aware of?”

“Transformation’s never quite worked,” muttered Bon Bon.

Aldrovanda nodded sympathetically. “So sad. I had a cousin whose Glamour went cold one day, and never really recovered. He could never get the left side of his face to transform properly, so he always had to seduce his meals with his head angled like so.” Aldrovanda tilted her head awkwardly. “Never was much of a hunter after that, poor fellow.” She paused, and went on, “But ‘Bon Bon,’ really? Mendax is such a nice name! So elegant! And, if I may say so,” Aldrovanda gave another toothy grin, “exceedingly appropriate. Or do they know?”

“I’ve not told anypony, no.”

“‘Anypony?’ Oh, how sweet, you’ve even started using their funny little words. You really have gone completely native, haven’t you? Do you find yourself spontaneously making pony-related puns? Inquiring minds wish to know.”

She really should have run when she first saw the wretched creature coming, thought Bon Bon. This was just digging up a past that ought to have stayed buried—and she had forgotten how obnoxious Aldrovanda was. She snapped back, “What’s a kelpie doing so close to Ponyville, anyway? Feeding here is asking for trouble. I’d move away, if I were you.”

Aldrovanda sank down into the water until only her head was above the surface, weedy mane drifting around her in matted clumps. “Oh, I imagine I could get away with it; the little morsels would probably just blame any disappearances on that idiotic hydra. But,” she chuckled, “the issue isn’t likely to come up. I’m no fool, Dum Du—whoops, Bon Bon. It’s been ages since I’ve tasted ponyflesh; now I mostly make do with fish, and if someone—Oh I do beg your pardon, that should be somepony, shouldn’t it?—does come along, like you just did...well, even the ponies’ finicky guardian, that Sun Princess, could hardly object to a little catch-and-release, all in good fun, of course.”

“I don’t think she’s that tolerant.” *Calm, Bon Bon, keep calm*, she thought. *She can’t help what she is*. But another part of her mind whispered back, *Oh no? You were able to help it*. Aldrovanda continued chatting.

“You should hear what the other kelpies say. They think I’ve gone quite soft! Honestly, if I didn’t practice on the occasional passer-by, I’d be a complete laughing stock.” The kelpie paused, a thoughtful look on her face. “Say, how have you been feeding? You were ‘Bon Bon’ when I last saw you, and that was ages ago. Where’s the love coming from? I didn’t think that your kind could keep a host alive for more than a year, at the very most. The late lamented Bon Bon must have been very fortunate in her choice of beloved, if he had that much love for her.” Aldrovanda chuckled. “And, of course, unfortunate. What did you do with the original?”

“I’m not like that anymore, Aldrovanda, and what’s more I stopped being like that long before I ever met you or came to Ponyville. There was no original, and even if there had been, I wouldn’t have *dared* hurt Lyra by stealing...” Bon Bon stopped herself, too late. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Aldrovanda had raised herself up out of the water again, and was staring at Bon Bon as if she were some strange new beast, unknown and possibly dangerous. Her eyes narrowed.

“Lyra? And who might Lyra be?”

“It’s not important, and I’m wasting time, yours and mine. Goodbye, Aldrovanda. See you in a few years, maybe.”

“No, no, hold a moment. You pique my interest. You speak of this stallion, whoever he is, in a protective way, changeling. A remarkably protective way.” She shot a keen glance at Bon Bon, who was trying not to look like she was panicking and failing miserably. “A changeling in love; fancy. I’ve heard of things like that, but—well, one never quite believes that such perversions actually happen, does one? Explains how he’s been kept

alive, at any rate, what with you vomiting love right back. That should have starved you long ago, though...”

“Shut the hay up, kelpie. It’s none of your business. And Lyra is a mare’s name.”

“Indeed? Perversion compounded with perversion! My goodness, you don’t do anything by halves, do you?” The kelpie rolled on to her back and arched her neck, leering upside-down at Bon Bon. “How unbelievably depraved. And the Unseelie Court knows nothing of this? But how silly of me, of course it doesn’t. I’m only a poor wittle kelpie, so I can’t say I’ve ever met Queen Chrysalis on what might be called a social standing, but if she’s anything like our Queen Xubidu, then I don’t fancy you’d be nearly so...well, *alive*, otherwise.” Aldrovanda considered for a moment, and then grinned. “Well, no slime off my hide. Keep your pet, if you want; I won’t tell, I promise. The Court and I don’t always see eye to eye on things—I’m not nearly ferocious enough, they say, but ferocity is just so tiring—and reporting you would be a lot of bother.”

Bon Bon found herself feeling, for the first time in years, that Aldrovanda might have some good qualities. This novel sensation evaporated within a few seconds as the kelpie, unable to quit while she was ahead, kept talking.

“Not that you’re likely to be able to keep it up for long, of course. What with Queen Chrysalis’ plans, you’ll soon have neighbors enough who’ll be less tolerant than I. You’d best get over these feelings of yours, Mendax, and that right quick. When’s the invasion planned, anyway?”

There were a thousand things Bon Bon could have said at this juncture, and to her infinite later regret, she picked what was arguably the worst option.

“Invasion? What invasion?”

“What do you mean, ‘What invasion?’ The attack on the—” Aldrovanda stopped, and continued far more hesitantly, “What *do* you mean? You’re a changeling; you *must* have been—She’s been drafting everyone, even a few from outside her clan—” She subsided into a speculative silence, staring at Bon Bon.

There was a long moment during which neither of them spoke.

“Oh, that invasion,” said Bon Bon. “Right.”

“I take back my earlier statement,” said Aldrovanda. “Mendax does not suit you in any way, shape, or form. You were right, Dum Dum is far more apt.”

Bon Bon would have corrected her, but at the moment she felt that she had a point. “Fine, I didn’t know about it. An oversight, probably. What invasion, Aldrovanda? Tell me.”

The kelpie paddled backwards into the putrid waters of the swamp, eyes still fixed on Bon Bon. “You know, I don’t believe I will. I was right, I think—you’ve gone native, and what’s more I think the Unseelie Court knows it too, or suspects. If you’re lucky, they’ve just forgotten that you exist, but I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Tell me!”

“Nuh-uh. Just forget about the whole thing, there’s a good little race traitor. Things will end better for you that way. Oh, and one last bit of advice; remember what I said about ditching the marefriend? That probably won’t be enough. I’d kill her, if I were you.” The kelpie paused, considering, and then added, “Actually, I’d kill her if I were me. And how convenient for both of us: I *am*! That’s a standing invitation, Mendax; you want to do the smart thing and get rid of her, just send her down here to the bog, and I’ll take care of all the messy details. Like I said, I haven’t tasted pony in ages.”

Stupid, stupid, ten thousand times stupid! Rotting twigs and fragments of bark disintegrated squishily under Bon Bon's hooves as she galloped away from the bog. The evil little thing knew about her—about Lyra. A kelpie knew. She had talked to a kelpie. She had talked to one of the Shee. Bon Bon quickened her pace, hurrying back towards the happy banality of Ponyville and away from the Unseelie and Fey. She had kept aloof from that other world so long and so successfully that she had almost convinced herself that she really was separate from it and that nothing could drag her back.

Idiot.

Even now, as the sun sank lower in the sky and dusk dripped down out of the gnarled branches overhead, she was feeling, hearing, seeing, and sensing things that hadn't wound their way into her carefully-maintained bubble of normalcy in years. That distant hollow piping wasn't birdsong, but tiny flutes, carved with obsidian knives from the bones of toads and played by silver-furred pipers with colorless eyes. She shivered as she ran through an invisible thread of creased space, the scar left in the fabric of reality by elfshot fired Celestia knew—no, Epona knew how many hundreds of years before. Nearby in space and slightly sideways in time, something shaped like a pony but with legs many times too long was striding along on business of its own, laughing at a joke that Bon Bon wished she didn't understand. And the smell...it rose up around her, seeping from the branches and twigs and small scurrying things with too many legs. It was a smell like fresh-plowed earth, but stronger and more alive, a smell of living magic full of eerie delight and uncontrolled by any unicorn or alicorn.

Bon Bon cantered to a halt and collapsed to her haunches. Too much, too much. She couldn't make it back to Ponyville like this. If she tried she'd slip out of time and into Faerie, and if she ever wound her way back into the real world again hundreds of years could have passed. She closed her eyes, forced herself to breathe slowly, and pushed the ancient eldritch thoughts out of her head, thinking of pies, saddlebags, curtains, horseshoes—*Years ago when they were still getting to know one another, Lyra had tried to get her to wear horseshoes, and when she refused all of Lyra's irritation with Bon Bon's other oddities had boiled over. The resulting quarrel, the last major one they had ever had on the subject, had nearly ended their relationship. Bon Bon had wished that she could explain, but Lyra didn't, couldn't, and must never know that the touch of cold iron against Bon Bon's skin was poison to her and to all Shee—better not think about horseshoes.* Apples, chairs, beds, a warm fire burning in the hearth. That was better. Lyra's smile, Lyra's laughter, the warmth of Lyra's body against her flank as they drifted off to sleep. That was best.

Green light flashed behind Bon Bon's closed eyes, and when she opened them they were the eyes of an earth pony again, simple and plain and everyday. She could still hear the faint piping of the bushwoses and smell that insidious green scent, but the touch of horrible familiarity they had carried earlier was gone. She rose unsteadily to her hooves, and keeping her eyes fixed firmly on the pinnacle of the Ponyville town hall, just visible above the trees, she stepped forward, her breath still coming in short, harsh gulps. One hoof in front of the other. Soon she'd be home. Soon she'd hear Lyra's voice again, talking happily about her latest modifications to the fing-er or singing as she practiced the lyre, and then the other voices would stop chittering and whispering in her ears.

Sooner than soon, perhaps. Even as she stumbled forward, Bon Bon heard, faint but distinct, her own name being called. The pipes of the bushwoses fell silent. The distant voice called out again, firm but tinged with a sliver of fear, and in the face of its solid, determined reality the eerie shadows and whispers surrounding Bon Bon coiled in upon themselves and disappeared, like water sinking into parched soil. Bon Bon gulped down good, plain, unscented air, and called out, "Lyra! Lyra, it's me! I'm here!"

The Manehattan accent was back, but right now she couldn't have cared less about that. Twigs crackled and leafy branches rustled somewhere up ahead and drew nearer, and then a green-white blur shot out of the undergrowth and collided with her in a fervent tackle-hug, knocking her to the ground. Bon Bon made a noise that could perhaps have been best approximated as "Oomp!" while Lyra kept hugging her, a stream of words tumbling out of the green mare's mouth all the while: "...And I was so *worried*, and it was getting dark and Monsoor Cuisine said you hadn't come by and the Apples were out in the fields but their filly said she hadn't seen you come by either and I kept thinking about the hydra or maybe Bighoof really exists and he snatched you up because I heard he does that sometimes if he exists that is which maybe he doesn't and I should have gone with you what was I *thinking* and..."

Bon Bon blinked, and then started laughing, partly out of relief and partly out of sheer amused happiness that Lyra was so fundamentally...well, who she was. "Ow! Easy, sweetie, easy." She gave her marefriend a reassuring squeeze. "It's okay. I'm fine." With a gentle push Bon Bon nudged Lyra up and rose to her own hooves. "See? No limbs missing."

Lyra, reassured, promptly flipped her emotional dial from "anxious" to "indignant." "Then what the hay happened!? You promise me a nice dinner out on the town, and instead you go off and get yourself all vanished, no reservation at La Musset Duh Avoyne (Several months earlier Lyra had decided that she was going to learn Fancy, and had approached the task in something of the manner of an ancient Pegasopolan warrior

battling a manticore. Bon Bon suspected that the reason her marefriend had so much trouble getting a decent grasp on the language was that she had started out at “death grip” and hadn’t yet thought to loosen her hold), no rennet apples—” She glanced at Bon Bon’s empty saddlebags. “—And no marsh mallow, either. And you—you’re shivering! And scratched, and muddy—Bon Bon, something did happen, didn’t it?”

Oh no. She had dealt with the actual stress so well, she had thought, but now that the piping and that...that scent were both gone and Lyra was with her, her traitorous body appeared to have decided that it was the perfect time to go to pieces. “N-no, really. I ju-just got los—I ju—I—” And then suddenly she was sobbing, clinging desperately to Lyra and blubbing out half-formed sentences as she tried to say that this was silly, that she’d be better in a second, that she didn’t know what had come over her but she was really better now, seriously... Lyra held her marefriend and said nothing, gently stroking Bon Bon’s mane as the yellow mare sobbed against her back.

Eventually, Bon Bon’s sobs subsided to tears, and some time after that the tears faded away into sniffles. She let go of Lyra, and murmured “Sorry. I don’t know what—”

“Ep ep ep! No apologies.” Lyra grinned and nuzzled her marefriend. “Let’s get you home. You can tell me about it then, and whatever it is, tomorrow I’ll bust its snoot good for messing with my main mare. But not now. Now, we just get you home and get some food inside you, mmkay?”

Bon Bon sniffled, and smiled. “Mmkay.” As the Sun set the two mares walked out from beneath the cloying shadows of the swamp trees into the wholesome, star-studded darkness of Princess Luna’s night. The silence they left behind lasted only a little while before the bushwoses began their thin, echoing piping once more.

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The moon was a good deal higher in the sky now than it had been when the two mares made their way back into Ponyville, and the windows of Bon Bon and Lyra’s prim whitewashed house were dark and still. Lyra had fallen asleep about an hour before and lay sprawled beside Bon Bon in their bed, snoring gently, but Bon Bon was still awake, staring up into the darkness and thinking. Everything felt so right and safe, and it was so tempting to suppose that that really was so, and go back to life as it had been—as it ought to be. But it wasn’t that simple. She had made a terrible mistake, and nothing would be safe until it had been fixed. She turned her head to her right, reached out a hoof, and gently stroked Lyra’s mane. Such a clever, beautiful, wonderful pony—and that wretched kelpie knew about her. If that had been all, Bon Bon wouldn’t have been seriously

frightened; deceitful as Aldrovanda was, she was also terribly lazy, and the kelpie had probably been quite honest when she said that reporting Bon Bon would be too much trouble for her to bother. But it wasn't all.

An invasion! The Unseelie Court had kept to itself for so long, now, lurking away from the Sun in the shadowy, forgotten corners of the world and living on misplaced time, that Bon Bon had supposed that it would never creep out of its den again, but from what Aldrovanda had let slip that evidently wasn't so. "What with Queen Chrysalis' plans, you'll soon have neighbors enough who'll be less tolerant than I," she had said...That couldn't just be a changeling infiltration of Ponyville, which was what Bon Bon had been afraid of at first. Ponyville was too closely connected to Canterlot for the slow draining of life from the town to go unnoticed, and surely Queen Chrysalis wouldn't dare to pit herself against the Sun and Moon Princesses with nothing but the power that she could leech from this little settlement. No, it had to be something grander; if there were going to be changelings in Ponyville, then there would also have to be changelings in Canterlot. And if there were changelings in Canterlot...

Bon Bon shuddered. This was *big*. Devastating, Equestria-crushing, world-dominating big. Somepony had to be told about this; the Princesses had to be warned. If they only knew to be on their guard and were able to stop things before they got too far out of hoof then surely Celestia and Luna would be able to put a stop to it and send the changelings crawling back into the shadows—well, all but one of the changelings—so that she and Lyra, and everypony else, would be safe again. She needed some contact with Canterlot, then. There was the Princess' student at the library, Twilight Sparkle; she, Bon Bon knew, sent letters regularly to the Princess, and although Bon Bon didn't know her well—she was something of a celebrity, and she and Bon Bon moved in different circles—they were acquainted by sight, and she probably knew enough about the Unseelie Court from her studies to take the warning seriously. Yes, that was it. Tomorrow morning, she'd head over to the library, and explain the whole business to Sparkle.

Or perhaps not. She hadn't talked to Sparkle often, but she had had...encounters with her, and those encounters had not been encouraging. That pony wasn't quite right; she was a terribly powerful mage, and sometimes Bon Bon suspected that all that magic had fried her brain a bit. There had been that time when she cast a spell which made parasprites devour a good three-quarters of the town, for example, and that horrible thing with the mind-control spell and the doll, and then her dragon had run amok, and then just a few weeks ago she had claimed that she had been visited by her time-traveling future self...

No, Twilight Sparkle was right out. She was a decent sort, and meant well—when she wasn't stark staring mad she was really quite a nice pony, and she had saved Ponyville slightly more often than she had destroyed it—but she was not the pony you wanted to go to in a crisis: she'd probably decide that the sanest course of action would be to transform everypony into potted plants. It would have to be somepony in Canterlot, then, which would mean a trip to Canterlot itself. Bon Bon briefly considered directly contacting Celestia and Luna, but then rejected the idea with a shudder. She wasn't so sure about Princess Luna's stability either, not after last Nightmare Night, and Celestia was *Celestia*: Sol Invicta, the Eternal Light, the Daystar Undimmed. No, it would have to be somepony else; whoever was in charge of the defense of the city. The captain of the guard, maybe; somepony like that. He or she could relay the message to the Princesses, they would do whatever they needed to do, and everything would be safe and right again. Bon Bon's eyes drooped, flickered once, twice, three times, and then closed as she drifted off to sleep.

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"Canterlot!?" Lyra looked up from the breakfast table, dribbling fragments of daisy sandwich from the corner of her mouth. "Why? You never shaid anyfing—" She swallowed. "—Anything about a trip. And you'd be gone all day! I thought we were going to have that dinner out on the town this evening, since it didn't work out yesterday?"

Across the room Bon Bon swished the remains of the meal into their compost chute with a flick of her tail, and raised herself up to the sink so she could scrape blackened corn muffin batter off a pan with her forehooves. She bit her lip. "I know it's sudden, sweetie, but...it's important. I'm really, really sorry about this, but I promise it's something I have to do."

"But *why*?" Lyra slid out of her chair and trotted over to her marefriend's side. "Bon Bon, level with me. You come back from Froggy Bottom Bog looking like you saw Discord dancing the mambo with Nightmare Moon, you have a panic attack in the middle of the woods, you won't say a thing about what happened out there afterwards—Oh horsefeathers, it's 'won't,' not 'can't,' and you know it—and now suddenly you're off to Canterlot, no explanation, no heads-up, just 'Seeya tomorrow, Lyra. Toodles!' Filly, I'm not letting you go anywhere until you explain yourself. It was the Bog, wasn't it? What happened out there?" Lyra lifted herself up to her hind legs, only a little awkwardly, and leaned over the sink beside Bon Bon, trying to catch her marefriend's eye. "Bon Bon...why won't you talk to me?"

Bon Bon winced. She could feel the worry in Lyra's voice, and what's more she could feel it—taste it? Not all the senses of a changeling could be described in the words of a pony—in the warm, buoyant threads of Lyra's love for her, humming through the depths of her marefriend's mind. She knew she needed to tell Lyra the truth; she'd known it for years, ever since she had first fallen in love with the strange, excitable unicorn. She'd even come close to telling her once or twice, but it was never quite the right moment...

Of course it was never the right moment. There never could be a "right moment" for admitting that she'd lied to Lyra for years about who and what she was, and no matter what it would be a hard and painful talk, and might mean the breaking of both their hearts. But it would have to be done, nonetheless. She owed it to Lyra.

"Y—yes. Yes, it was the bog. Lyra, I'm—" *Say it.* "I'm a—" *Say it. She needs to hear this. You need to admit this.* "When I was younger, I—" She stared into her marefriend's eyes, and without consciously intending to she imagined them widening in shock, and then narrowing in hatred. She imagined the mare she loved drawing back from her, forehoof raised in disgust and fear, and then she imagined the love in the green unicorn's mind writhing and dying in a sea of hate. Bon Bon's shoulders slumped. "When I went to the Bog I met someone I used to know." She couldn't do it. Not now. "And I learned something dangerous from them."

"Someone?"

"Somepony, I meant. Don't know why I said that." *Coward. She deserves to know. She deserves the truth.* "But this thing I learned—I don't know when it'll actually happen, but it's being prepared right now, and when it does happen it'll be big, big and dangerous. I have to find somepony who can do something about it now, before everything falls apart. The Princesses need to know, and that's why I need to go to Canterlot. So I can warn them. So that we—so that Equestria can be safe." She bowed her head, avoiding Lyra's eyes.

Lyra reached out a hoof and with firm gentleness lifted Bon Bon's head back up again, forcing her marefriend to look at her. Speaking quietly and deliberately, she said, "Bon Bon. What danger? Who told you? What aren't you telling me?"

"I *can't*, it's—I—" Bon Bon swallowed, and then sighed and closed her eyes. "You're right. I'm sorry. Lyra, I'll tell you everything as soon as I get back from this trip. Not just who I met, what the danger is, and what happened at the Bog, but *everything*. I'll tell you why I have my fits, why I won't wear horseshoes, even why my voice changes all the time! Everything! It's all connected, and I owe it to you—I have owed it to you, for a long

time—to tell you the truth.” She opened her eyes again, and met Lyra’s gaze. With a smile—a weak smile, yes, but a smile—she said, “That’s a promise, dear heart.”

It was sunset in Canterlot, the queen of Equestrian cities and the divine court of Celestia, the Princess of the Sun. Rich saffron light glinted off towering alabaster columns and brass domes and swept down like a song of gladness into the streets below, where the blessed inhabitants of the royal city, manes beautifully coiffed and coats groomed to perfection, went about their evening affairs. Everypony was dressed in rare fabrics and shining jewels, and as they wandered through the dusk, wrapped in deep cobalt shadows and flashing in golden brilliance when they happened to step into one of the long, low slanting bolts of sunlight, they talked to one another in refined Canterlot accents, speaking (no doubt) of noble matters far removed from the everyday chatter and gossip of Ponyville.

Bon Bon stood in the door of the railway coach, fidgeting in the unaccustomed tightness of her dress and peering out from beneath an enormous, wide-brimmed hat. It was the finest and most elegant hat available in Ponyville (or so she had been assured by Miss Rarity at Carousel Boutique when, in a moment of extravagance that she had chided herself for later, she bought it several months before), but Bon Bon couldn't help wishing that it had been a bit bigger and finer. She always felt underdressed in Canterlot. She had hoped that the city of cities would cow her a bit less this time, but to her chagrin she discovered that she felt just as self-conscious when attempting to save Equestria from a horrific fate as she did when accompanying Lyra into town for one of her orchestra auditions. She bit her lip and, hoping desperately that the elaborate curls in her mane at least vaguely resembled this year's style, stepped out of the coach and on to the deep green marble flagstones of Canterlot. Slightly to her surprise, nopony paused to gawk and whisper at her.

Now, then. What was the first order of business? A list. She knew she had brought a list with her. Bon Bon undid the lyre clasp of the saddlebag across her back (her own saddlebag had still not emerged from whatever lair in which it had hidden itself, so she had had to borrow Lyra's again), and after rummaging about a bit, extracted a crumpled sheet of paper. She propped this up against a sunlit wall, smoothing it out with her hooves, and read:

1. Sandpaper, coarse grade
2. Lapis Lazuli paint (indoor use)
3. Lyre strings (package of 8)
4. Marsh mallow (May not be able to find. If more than five bits per bundle, pass)
5. Warn Captain of Guard of imminent changeling invasion, thus saving all of Equestria from certain doom.

6. Powdered sugar

7. Almonds

Bon Bon nodded to herself, proud that even in this crisis she had had the presence of mind to organize herself properly. She would have completely forgotten about the almonds otherwise.

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The lanterns of Canterlot had been lit, and Bon Bon, wearier and bearing a heavier saddlebag, stood at a street crossing peering up in the gloaming at a sign overhead and trying to decide whether it said “Trotsworth Avenue” or “Trotwood Avenue.” She had gathered sandpaper (coarse grade) and paint; she had found a package of lyre strings for a bargain price, and although no marsh mallow had been available, the shopkeep at Canterlot Nurseries had assured her that they would be getting a shipment in two weeks. She had picked up a packet of sugar and a bag of sweet almonds, and found some food dye, to boot. She had also, finally, run out of things to do before dealing with the intimidating Item #5 on her list.

Well, best get it over with. Bon Bon sighed, decided that the sign did, indeed, say “Trotsworth Avenue,” and turned to her left, glancing up at the houses lining the lane as she trotted along. They reminded her of the grand homes of the wealthier Ponyville set, but for the fact that their ostentation was much less aggressive. The ponies living here didn’t need to prove their superiority; it was a self-evident fact, and if their walls were inlaid with beautifully carved wooden arabesques and their doors great arched affairs, gleaming with brass fittings, it was because such decorations were only right and proper, not because their residents were trying to prove anything. They didn’t need to prove anything.

Bon Bon moved on. This was hardly the time or place for such thoughts; there were far more urgent things to attend to. No. 23, No. 25, No. 27...Ah, here it was. She came to a halt in front of an elegant home, distinguished from the others along the lane by a stylized shield and starburst suspended above the front door—the mark of Shining Armor, Captain of the Guard. Standing at attention on either side of the double door were two pegasi guards. There was something slightly off about them—their ears seemed oddly tufted, and there was a strange, leathery quality to the wings clasped at their sides. For a horror-filled moment Bon Bon thought that they were Shee, and that the changeling queen had already set her plans into motion, before she recollected seeing similar creatures at that disastrous Nightmare Night party last autumn. Of course, they were batguards, the retainers of Princess Luna. Odd that they should be in Canterlot, but

then again it probably made more sense to use them as night guards than it did to use normal pegasi, even if it meant shifting them away from...wherever it was that Princess Luna was living now. Rumor said the Everfree Forest, but Bon Bon didn't quite believe that.

Natives of the Everfree or not, they looked distressingly alert, and Bon Bon strongly suspected that they wouldn't willingly let any random pony off the street into the house. There was probably some more official venue for contacting Captain Shining Armor, but not at this hour, and time was of the essence. Bon Bon trotted past the home, trying to look as casual as possible, and after she was reasonably sure that they were no longer paying close attention to her she dodged to her right into a small fenced park, grass gleaming in the moonlight and curtains of shadow hanging from the trees. No pony seemed to be here. Perfect. Bon Bon removed her saddlebag, doffed her hat, worked her way out of her dress, and then hid everything under what looked like a reasonably dry bush (no sense in spoiling a perfectly good outfit). After one last furtive glance about to make sure that she really was unobserved, Bon Bon closed her eyes and concentrated. Tongues of cold green flame flickered about her hooves, sending tiny writhing tendrils snaking up her legs and around her torso. The fiery threads paused, hissing and sputtering against her flanks, and then blazed forth, enveloping her in an emerald inferno that tore through the air for a fraction of a second before disappearing as suddenly as it had arisen.

A pony that did not look at all like Bon Bon rose unsteadily to her—his?—feet. It had been a long time since she had tried that, and assuming a new form was a lot more taxing than reverting to an old one. She wasn't working with anything like the power she had had in the old days, either... Well, it ought to be good enough. She trotted out of the park, stumbling a little in her new body with its unfamiliar proportions, and made her way back to Captain Shining Armor's home.

As she approached, the batguards snapped to attention. Good. She had been a bit worried about her ability to perfectly mimic the good captain, as she only had a vague idea of what he looked like, but evidently any slight inaccuracies in the white coat, striped blue mane, and stallion's body that she had adopted were being glossed over in the guards' minds by the mind-numbing aura projected by all Shee—their Glamour. She nodded to them perfunctorily, and trotted up the stairs and through the tall double doors, which she immediately closed. After checking to make certain that no pony was present, Bon Bon flamed her way out of the captain's form and into the shape of a pink-maned unicorn mare—no pony she knew, just a passerby she had seen earlier in the day who looked like she would be fairly simple to mimic. If this little expedition was successful, Queen Chrysalis—the entire Unseelie Court, as a matter of fact—would be

extremely unhappy, and Bon Bon did not want them to figure out whom to be unhappy at. Probably best, in fact, to try to make it seem as if it hadn't even been a changeling who had raised the alarm...

Bon Bon trotted across the room (a rather ostentatious room to Bon Bon's mind, with its high ceiling and pennant-decorated walls, although by Canterlot standards it was quite subdued) to a sturdy oak door through which she could hear muted voices. Raising her hoof, she gave the wooden panels a timid rap. The murmured conversation in the room ceased, and then she heard hoofsteps approaching the door. It swung open to reveal an extremely book-infested room, a puzzled Captain Shining Armor, and one other pony, who glanced up at Bon Bon for a moment and then returned her attention to the parchment in front of her, suspended in the air in a web of indigo magic. Her dark wings were clasped against her flanks, and her mane drifted aimlessly through the still air, a deep blue veil studded with flickering points of light that appeared oddly distant. She wore a black tiara.

Bon Bon realized belatedly that the batguards at the entrance to the captain's home were not, in fact, standard-issue night watchponies. Evidently Princess Luna had come to consult the captain on some point of security—which would have been ideal, if she hadn't been Princess Luna, and therefore doubly terrifying in that she was (A.) an alicorn and (B.) questionably stable, at best. Bon Bon was going over possible responses to this new development and had almost decided that laughing hysterically and bolting would be the best option, when the captain spoke.

"It's...Twinkleshine, isn't it? Yes, Twinkleshine, that was it. Cadence's friend. What are you doing here? Why did the guards let you pass?"

Oh Celestia, he knows her. ...And she's named 'Twinkleshine.' Aldrovanda would have a field day with that. Hysterical laughter and a mad dash to safety were looking more and more appealing every second. But this might be the only chance she got—and she and Lyra would never be safe otherwise. This had to be done.

"I, uh—" This had gone so much more smoothly in her head. "Apparently, yes, it's Twinkleshine."

"Apparently?" Behind the captain, Princess Luna raised her head from the parchment and stared at Bon Bon. It did not improve the—temporarily—pink-maned unicorn's composure.

“What I mean to say is, um...” *Concealment. If he knows I’m a changeling, the Queen might find out that it was a changeling who betrayed her, and that puts me as the prime suspect.* “This is Twinkleshine’s body—she’s safe, by the way, no harm done, it’s reversible—but not her mind. I’m, uh, a spirit possessing her. Out of the very best motives. Um.”

Shining Armor blinked, and rubbing his forehead with his hoof he muttered something which sounded suspiciously like “It had to be the salt addict...” In a louder tone, he continued, “That’s very nice. Don’t you think you’d better be getting back home, though? I’m sure even spirits need rest.” He turned to Princess Luna, whose eyebrows were currently raised so far that they seemed to be in danger of drifting off her face entirely. “I’m sorry you had to see this, Your Highness. She’s a good pony, and she and my fiancée have been friends for ages, but she does have this weakness. Do you think that one of your retinue might be spared to escort her home? Right now she’s not exactly capable.”

She *really* should have opted for the laugh-hysterically-and-run option. “No, wait!” Bon Bon tried to force her way past Shining Armor into the study, rearing up in an attempt to squeeze past. “It’s not—I’m not—I’m telling the truth! I came here to warn you; the Unseelie Court is planning an attack, you have to believe me, I...”

“Whoa, steady now.” The captain gently forced Bon Bon down to her hooves again. “Easy, Twinkleshine.” He looked over his shoulder at Princess Luna. “On second thought, maybe it’d be best if I got her back home, with your leave, of course.”

“Nay, captain. Let her come in.” The princess placed her parchment on a desk already heaped high with papers, and directed a searching stare at Bon Bon. Shining Armor glanced at Bon Bon as well, then shrugged and stepped to one side. The princess stepped forward. “Didst thou—excuse us, did you say ‘Unseelie?’”

Bon Bon nodded. Luna continued to stare at Bon Bon, evidently not quite certain what to make of her, and then turned to Shining Armor. “A question, captain. Is that a common word in these days? Do the ponies still speak of the Fae?”

Shining Armor shrugged. “I’ve never heard it before. Is it important?”

“It was, upon a time.” The princess looked back at Bon Bon. “Tell me, little one-who-would-call-herself-a-spirit, what do you know of the Fae?”

“We call ourselves the Shee, actually,” murmured Bon Bon, and then tacked a hurried “Your Highness” to the end of the sentence. She was honestly quite impressed; the

princess hadn't started shouting or banning national holidays or anything. Maybe she'd mellowed out since last autumn.

"Aye, that was the old word." The princess pursed her lips, and then turned her back on Bon Bon, looking up at the tattered covers and creased spines of the many books lining the study walls. "Are you familiar, spirit, with the circumstances surrounding my recent return to this land?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"You know what she's talking about, princess?" said Shining Armor.

"Then you are aware that when I last knew this land for what it really was, when I felt the rhythm of its songs and the thrum of its life, it was a thousand years younger than it is today. I am a creature out of time, spirit, and I am not yet canny to the ways of this new world. But one thing I do know; even a thousand years ago the Unseelie Court was little more than a legend, a faint fading power that sometimes made itself known in small mischiefs and spites, but never anything greater. The Court danced its mad dances in caves and grottoes, hidden from both my Moon and my sister's Sun, and ever they dwindled."

She frowned. "You are not salt-addled; your voice is unsteady, but it is not the unsteadiness of a sot. You are afraid, I believe. And here ye be, speaking of the Unseelie Court and the Shee—the Shee! Even a thousand years ago, precious few ponies knew that word. It comes from *their* tongue—as if it were yet the Untangling Days, and the Court still vied for power with my sister and me." The princess considered for a moment. "Well, there is a way to test part of your tale, at least. Captain, you are shod with iron horseshoes. If you would press one of your hooves against—"

"No!" Bon Bon leapt back, hooves clattering against flagstones. "That—you have no idea what that's like, how painful it is."

"Is anypony going to tell me what's going on?" said Shining Armor.

"Some token of your truthfulness is needed, spirit, and if you are truly possessing this pony and this is not merely some mad prank, iron will tell."

Bon Bon shuddered. "Something smaller, then." She looked vaguely about the room, noticed a nail protruding from the wall, and raised a hoof to it, wincing as the metal touched her pastern. There was a hissing sound, and the faint but distinct scent of

burning hair. She held it there for perhaps a second, and then lifted it up again, turning her hoof so that Luna could see the shiny red welt on her skin.

The princess drew a long, low, hissing breath. “Fae indeed.”

Shining Armor blinked. “Um, princess, what’s—”

“Wickedness, captain. It remains to be seen what manner of wickedness.” The star-maned alicorn dropped to her haunches, bringing her eyes level with Bon Bon’s. “You said you came to warn us. Of what?”

Finally, things were getting somewhere. “An attack—an invasion, in fact. One of the queens of the Unseelie Court is planning an assault on Equestria.”

Luna shook her head irritably. “This much you had already said. I meant the details, spirit. Which of the queens? What is the manner in which they will attack? How do they hope to prevent my sister and me from defending our subjects?”

Bon Bon hesitated. It would be better, probably, to warn the princess that Queen Chrysalis was the force behind the attack, but every extra detail she gave out was another link in the chain connecting this treachery to her. In any case, most of the beings in the Unseelie Court were shapeshifters of one kind or another; the changelings were just the best at it. The princesses would be expecting disguises. “I don’t really know. I’m not exactly popular at the Court; in fact, I wasn’t even supposed to know about this. All I know is that an invasion is planned, and all that I can guess is that the first target will be Canterlot. If Your Highnesses are put out of the way before you have a chance to organize a defense, taking the rest of Equestria will be easy.”

“Indeed. Holding it, however, might not be quite so easy.” For the briefest of moments a grim smile flickered across Luna’s face, and then she was serious again. “But that will be small comfort for those harmed by the invasion itself, no matter how unsuccessful it may be in the long term. Your place in this I do not quite understand, though. Why do you warn us? Have you not more to gain by keeping silent, even if you are not in the Court’s good graces?”

“Oh, uh, the Court and I have never gotten along; we disagree about a lot, and I don’t really want to get back into its good graces. I’d prefer for it to forget that I ever existed, to be honest.”

Luna raised an eyebrow. “Grand treachery against the Court is not likely to make it forget you. Is there not something else?”

“No. Well, yes. There’s....” Bon Bon bit her lip. “I—I’m sorry. I can’t tell you.”

“So be it.” Luna raised herself to her hooves again, and spoke to the bewildered captain of the guard. “Captain! Let it be known that we do not doubt this creature’s word. I will apprise my sister of this news, and then we must meet on the morrow to discuss what is to be done—and there is a very great deal that must be done.” She turned to Bon Bon. “I thank thee—pardon, you—for warning us so. If half of what I recall of the Court is still true, it was a brave act. If you wish, we can offer you sanctuary here, spirit. You will need to free poor Twinkleshine from your control, of course, but you will be kept safe from the Court, I swear it.”

Bon Bon bowed. “No, that’s alright, Your Highness. I really can’t. Thank you, though.”

“Very well.” Luna smiled. “If you have spoken truly and we overcome this threat, I should like to meet you again. I do not know what your kind values, and in your case perhaps even that knowledge would not be very helpful, but if there is aught we can do to honor you, let us know.”

There didn’t seem to be much of an answer to this other than an embarrassed “Thank you.” Bon Bon bowed again, and then edged back out of the study. Nervousness aside, that had all gone about as well as expected—better than expected, actually, considering how very sane the princess had been. Perhaps she had misjudged her. Bon Bon trotted past the batguards at the front door, who made no remark—they had probably arrived with Princess Luna in any case, so for all they knew “Twinkleshine” had already been inside at the time—and headed back to the little park where she had stashed her clothes and the results of her shopping trip. After a careful glance around to make sure that nopony was watching, she sent another gout of heatless green flame coiling around her body, and then she was Bon Bon again. She stretched, feeling the old familiar skin grow taut over the muscles and bones she had grown so comfortable in during all her years in Ponyville.

Yes, things felt safe again. They felt right again. Bon Bon worked her way back into her outfit, donned her hat and saddlebag, and heading out of the park turned left, trotting back along the lane that ran past Shining Armor’s home. She had gone scouting for inns earlier in the day, and had found a very nice one a few blocks down from the captain’s home. It was pricey as all get-out, of course, but this was Canterlot; everything was a bit more expensive than it had any right to be.

As she made her way down the lamp-lit street, she noticed another pony coming up the opposite way. The stranger was an exquisite unicorn, slender and graceful with a swirling

multihued mane and long, elegant limbs, and Bon Bon stopped for a moment to look at her. She was just telling herself that the unicorn was pretty enough in the shallow Canterlot way, but not a patch on Lyra (and almost believing it—the unicorn was really *very* beautiful), when the stranger, glancing up, noticed the attention she had attracted.

She froze for a fraction of a second, whipped her gaze a little ahead and to her left towards the two batguards on each side of the captain of the guard's door, and then snapped her attention back to Bon Bon, who was still not quite level with the house. Great rose-hued wings snapped up from her sides, unfolding with whip-crack suddenness. Wings! Sun and Moon. No wonder she was so beautiful; she wasn't just a unicorn with an alicornesque figure, she *was* an alicorn, kin to the princesses themselves. The stranger launched herself up, wings thrashing the chill night air as she plunged across the forty feet that separated herself and Bon Bon. Splintered fragments of stone shot up as her brass-shod hooves smashed against the pavement in front of the startled earth pony, who tried to leap back but only managed a sort of tangled stumble, sending her flailing on to her back. The alicorn stared sternly down at her for a moment, and then hissed, "Your eyes!"

"I—Your Highness, I—what?"

The alicorn bent down face-to-face with Bon Bon, and repeated, "Your eyes, you fool! They're blue! Change them, quick!" As she spoke a green fire flared and died in her own eyes. For the briefest of moments they looked far less like the soft, wide eyes of an alicorn than they did a cat's eyes, livid green and slit from top to bottom with a thin, sharp-tipped pupil.

No. Oh, Celestia, no. Bon Bon stammered "Ye—yes, my Queen," and a flickering sheen of chartreuse fire flashed across her face, replacing the crystalline changeling eyes she had accidentally adopted when shifting back to her normal form with the pale blue pony eyes she had worn for years.

"Careless wretch, you could have ruined everything!" The false alicorn planted a hoof firmly on Bon Bon's chest, pinning her against the rough granite flagstones. "There are far too few of us in the city yet. I will not tolerate mistakes. Do you understand, worm?"

"Yes. Yes, my Queen. Forgive me."

The queen sneered. "Certainly not. For now, though, your queen still has need of you. After the invasion is complete, then perhaps we can talk of forgiveness. Or perhaps not."

She lifted her foreleg, and Bon Bon scrambled back to her hooves. “I’ll decide in my own time. Now get out of my sight, and try to be at least vaguely competent.”

“Yes, my Queen. Thank you, my Queen.” Bon Bon bowed hurriedly and darted back the way she had come. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the false alicorn trot to the home of Shining Armor, nodding to the batguards as she walked up the steps.

Lost. Everything, absolutely everything, was lost. Queen Chrysalis was already inside the city, impersonating an *alicorn* of all beings, and any protection that was put in place would be too little and too weak to stop the storm that she would soon unleash on Canterlot, especially since she apparently had the ear of the captain of the guard, and would obviously be in Princess Celestia and Princess Luna’s confidence, as well. Bon Bon’s warning had come too late. There was no hope left for Equestria. The Court would take it all for itself, and the Shee would rule unchallenged once again, just as they had in the ancient past. Stone circles on every mountain peak, mistletoe and blood, dolmens and barrows... The old altars would break forth from the depths of bogs and flint-strewn fields, standing stark and tall in the untamed light of the madly dancing sun and moon, and struggling ponies bound in thorns and daubed with woad would be dragged forth yet again, one after another, to be lashed to the stone slabs. Obsidian knives and gaunt black ravens glutting themselves on horrors...

Bon Bon galloped on through the midnight streets of Canterlot. Mud splattered on the hem of her dress and her hat tumbled off her head, but what did that matter? The entire world was crumbling. She swerved back into the little park, tore off her dress, and tossed her saddlebag to the verge. None of that mattered anymore. She had to get Lyra away from all this. The Court would be utterly merciless when it discovered what had happened, and the only way that she could possibly keep Lyra safe was to get her as far away from Ponyville and Equestria as could be managed. They would have to give up everything, abandon everything they had worked so hard to create. Their beautiful, tidy, happy little house; Lyra’s strange, brilliant contraptions; Bon Bon’s lovely little window boxes with the flowers and herbs she had poured so many hours into maintaining; her baking; Lyra’s hopes for making it into the Canterlot Symphony; all of it was gone.

Chartreuse fire flashed up from her hooves and slithered around her body, burning away her earth pony form to reveal the glossy black exoskeleton, insect-like wings, and corroded, misshapen hooves of a changeling. There was no time left for inns or train tickets; they’d all be worthless soon enough, anyway. Bon Bon whirred her membranous wings experimentally and launched herself up into the dark, star-studded sky, bound for Ponyville.

Right now, all that mattered was speed.

It had to be admitted, Princess Luna was nothing if not conscientious. A lesser alicorn, faced with a dull meeting with Captain Shining Armor, would surely have skimmed when attending to her celestial duties—and upon learning that Canterlot and Equestria itself were in great peril, she could have been forgiven for letting the Milky Way dim, the aurora waver away, and the falling stars remain unfallen. It was getting on towards morning anyway, and it had been a pretty good night. Nopony would have blamed her.

Luna's standards, though, were evidently higher than that, for the stars sparkled as brilliantly as always, the craters of the moon were sharp and gleaming, and the ragged, exhausted changeling falling out of the sky over the thatched roofs of Ponyville, trailing thin ribbons of green flame, was...not a normal feature of the night sky. Thoroughly abnormal, in fact.

Well, nopony's perfect.

Corroded black hooves slammed against the packed dirt of one of Ponyville's side streets, chitinous knees buckled, and Bon Bon fell sprawling to the ground, her momentum sending her skidding across the lane to collide with an exoskeleton-jarring thud against an inconveniently placed house. She lay still for a moment, wheezing through the spiracles lining her flanks, and then tottered to her hooves. Thank Celestia, she was bruised, but unbroken. She pulled on her dwindling reserves of strength—normally she could have made it through weeks at a stretch without Lyra's love before she started to weaken, but this had not been a normal night, and the multiple transformations and her mad dash from Canterlot to Ponyville had taken their toll—and drenched herself in green fire. Her wings vanished into cream-colored flanks, her horn melded itself into her usual tidy curls, and her eyes shifted back to her everyday pale blue pony eyes, banishing the flickering ghosts of Faerie that had been darting in and out of the corners of her vision during the whole flight back.

Not that they'd stay banished for long, of course. The Unseelie Court would no longer be denied. Bon Bon took a deep breath and galloped off down the dimly lit streets of Ponyville. She wasn't sure where she and Lyra could go—far to the West or East, perhaps, where Celestia's Sun dipped down so near to the ground that it kneaded and tugged at the world's bones as it passed, drawing up liquid fire from deep below and scouring the stones clean of plant life. Bon Bon made a hard left, clods of dirt flying out from under her hooves as she sped on her way. The Sintered Lands were harsh places, inhabited by dragons, phoenixes, and pyralides, but the Unseelie Court would have no interest in them. With cleverness and care, two ponies might eke out a life there.

They might, that is, if Lyra agreed to come. If Lyra forgave her. Bon Bon exhaled heavily, willing herself not to dwell on that, and cantered to a halt in front of their home, its outline barely visible in the moon-cast shadows of the larger homes flanking it. She was relieved to see that the door was intact and the wooden latch unbroken; she had been half-afraid that she'd find the timbers smashed inward or ripped apart by Unseelie magic. Perhaps, she thought as she nudged the latch up with her snout, things wouldn't be so bad...

She tripped as she crossed the threshold, forehooves sliding forward as if she had been walking down a broken flight of stairs and had tried to step on a landing that wasn't there. Something was wrong. The quiet, humming warmth of Lyra's love was only faintly present, drifting like a fading memory, and the house didn't feel like their home anymore; it was just a baroque and pointless structure built of dead tree limbs, lost stones, baked clay and lime, grass stolen from last summer's meadows, and other random, mislaid fragments of a vast and eerie world. A creaking husk wrapped around emptiness. Bon Bon stood frozen for a moment, terrified.

"Lyra!"

The name came out in a high-pitched screech, desperate and raw. Bon Bon tore up the stairs and dashed to their bedroom, bucking open the lovely blue door and gouging the wood. Their bed had been slept in, but it was empty, and the sheets had been pulled from the mattress. The blankets were nowhere to be seen. Bon Bon whirled around and clattered back down the stairs.

"Lyra! Lyra, please! Please!"

She dashed into the kitchen. Nothing but pots and pans. The cellar. The Fing-er loomed in the darkness, but Lyra wasn't there. The living room. No Lyra. The small, cozy little den, where Bon Bon worked on her candies and Lyra practiced music in the summer evenings. Empty.

"No! Don't take her from me! Bring her back! Lyra!"

Bon Bon galloped through a doorway, rushed past shadowy shapes that might have been furniture, passed another doorway, turned left, dashed right, thudded against something sharp-edged and wooden, dashed right again...

She finally came to a halt back in the anteroom, her breath coming in harsh, shallow gasps and her hooves shivering. It couldn't be. It just couldn't. She called out Lyra's name one last time, broken and defeated.

And then, muted but unmistakable, Lyra's voice answered.

"Bon Bon? I'm—I'm here."

Bon Bon's head snapped up and she leapt unsteadily to her hooves, her vision swimming and blotted with darkness. Thank Celestia. Oh, thank Celestia. "Lyra! Where are you?"

"Up here." Lyra's voice was coming from somewhere upstairs. "In the—I'm taking a bath. Sorry, didn't hear you at first." The relief that had at first overwhelmed Bon Bon's mind was suddenly tinged with a thread of doubt. There was an oddly stilted quality to the voice, as if Lyra wasn't quite certain that she had said the right things and was even less sure of what to say next. Bon Bon trotted up the stairs and to the door of their bathroom, hope and fear jostling for precedence in the mind, and nudged the slightly ajar door open. Lyra lay slouched in a bubble-filled bath, her head leaning back against the tub's rim and her mane dripping water on the floor. The aquamarine unicorn's eyes were closed, and there was a relaxed smile on her face.

Bon Bon stepped hesitantly forward into the room. Lyra raised her eyebrows and grinned, keeping her eyes closed, and said, "Ey, Bon Bon."

There was love in the room, but it was faint and diffuse, and none of it was flowing from her marefriend. When Bon Bon had left yesterday morning, there had been shaken trust and pain running through Lyra's love, but the love had still been there. The bitterness couldn't have won out, surely? Bon Bon swallowed anxiously. "Lyra? Are you...okay?"

"Mm? Yeah, I'm dandy." Lyra slouched down further into the tub. "How was your trip? Did you get whatever it was you wanted to do done?"

"Y—yes, I did, but I—" Bon Bon stopped suddenly. Her vocal cords morphed wildly, as always happened when her concentration was broken. In a very different voice, flat and quavering, she continued "Your mane—there's waterweed in it."

Lyra's brows drew together. "Er, yes. I went swimming earlier today. Or wading, at least, and I tripped."

"Lyra, open your eyes. I need to see them." Please, no. It couldn't be. Please...

“But the light is so tiring! Really now, I can’t relax with it shining in my eyes. Why don’t you head off to sleep, and I’ll follow when I’ve finished my bath.”

Her voice brittle but steady, Bon Bon said, “Your eyes, Lyra. Open them. Now.”

The green unicorn said nothing for a moment, her body tense, and then she sighed and her shoulders slumped. She turned her head towards Bon Bon, and opening brown, goat-like eyes, “Lyra” said, “Very well, I concede.” Her mane morphed into the weedy, moldering mane of a kelpie, and her minty green coat grew black and scabrous. “Do give me this credit, I had your adorable little pet’s dialect down perfec—”

“I’LL KILL YOU!” An explosion of livid green fire blasted out from Bon Bon, arcing off her tattered wings in great roiling clouds and flaring from the changeling’s sickle-shaped fangs as she leapt towards the kelpie. *“I’ll kill you how DARE you, you evil—”*

Aldrovanda jumped backwards with a yelp, bringing about half the bathwater with her as she scabbled away from the enraged changeling. *“Whoa whoa she’s fine she’s alive she’s safe she’s well she’s suffering from a mild case of brainwashing I did not just say that she’s fine!”* She tripped and stumbled back, falling to the wooden floor. The kelpie seemed far more ragged and tattered than when Bon Bon had seen her two days before; there were twigs and fragments of grass clinging to her emaciated flanks, and her hooves were encased in masses of pebbles, sticks, leaves, and other detritus. Aldrovanda attempted what she probably thought was a reassuring smile and said, “Really, now. I assure you, your pet—er, marefriend is safe and well. Completely un-devoured. Probably having the time of her life, I’m sure.”

Bon Bon splashed forward across the bathwater-soaked floor. Planting a hoof on Aldrovanda’s damp chest and pinning her against the wall, she brought her head level with the kelpie’s and hissed, “What do you mean, brainwashing? Where is she, Aldrovanda? What have you done with her?”

Aldrovanda blinked nervously, and licked her fangs with a serpentine tongue. “It’s possible that she may have been kinda sorta cast under a Glamour. Just a little bit. And I did nothing with her! Believe me, Mendax—*sorryI meant BonBon!*—I would have been only too happy to leave you to your little games here. This was not my idea, and if it had been up to me—”

“Where. Is. She.”

Aldrovanda opened her mouth, shut it, and then meekly said, “Canterlot. She’s in Canterlot.”

The changeling sank back to her haunches. That was it, then. Queen Chrysalis knew, and had probably known even when she had encountered Bon Bon in Canterlot. Lyra had been taken—and it was this creature’s fault. Bon Bon glared at the cowering kelpie, and Aldrovanda shrank back, apparently hoping that the extremely solid wall behind her would suddenly develop a heretofore-undiscovered hole in which she could hide herself. “Now look, Bon Bon, be reasonable. Try to see things from my point of view.”

“Your point of view? *Your* point of view!?”

“Well, it’s not as though I wanted to have things turn out this way,” whined Aldrovanda. “It was those two changelings’ fault. Why, I’m practically the victim here. None of this would have happened, you know, if you weren’t so unutterably boring.”

“Boring—I—you—what.” Bon Bon spluttered incoherently for a moment, and then massaged her brow with a hoof like a cheese grater. It hurt, but honestly a little pain was a good thing right now; she needed to clear her mind of Aldrovanda’s—Aldrovanda-ness.

The kelpie shifted awkwardly. “See, I may possibly have been hanging around near Ponyville because the Court was suspicious of you and wanted someone to keep an eye on you. And the Court may have gotten just a bit suspicious of me after I stopped keeping tabs on you years ago because, well, you’re unutterably dull, after which it’s within the realm of possibility that they set a pair of changelings to keep an eye on both of us. Following which, it’s not impossible that these two changelings may have observed the little visit you paid me the evening before last, along with the revelation that you’d been indulging in about seventeen different kinds of perversion and harboring all kinds of treasonous sentiments, upon which they may have decided that if they abducted your lady love as a guarantee of your good behavior you’d be more tractable. And, finally, they might just have decided to punish me for my—how did they put it? It was rather clever. Ah, yes—‘selfish incompetence and apathy at a level that beggars belief’ by assigning me to give you their terms.”

“Which was all my fault because I’m not interesting enough.”

The kelpie nodded.

Bon Bon took a deep breath. “Look, just...whatever. Fine. I just want to know one thing, kelpie, and you’re going to tell me. How do I get her back?”

“Get her back?” Aldrovanda made a noise that probably would have become a derisive chortle if she hadn’t remembered that Bon Bon’s three-inch fangs were within easy reach of her throat. “You can’t get her back. That’s the whole point. They stole that little mortal away from you to keep you on your best behavior; as long as you crawl a shadowed and Unseelie path, they won’t harm her, but keep up your sungrubbing infatuation with ponykind—or for that matter do anything not to the Court’s liking, which knowing you probably wipes out most of your plans for the next year or so—and you know best what the upshot would be.” The kelpie paused, considering. “As a matter of intellectual curiosity, what *would* Chrysalis be likely to do with a hostage whose guarantor had not done as wished? Something involving acid, perhaps? Velvet ants? Manchineel trees?”

“She—she forgets about them.” Bon Bon swallowed painfully. Grand treason would probably be very much not to Chrysalis’ liking. All that remained was for the Shee carrying Lyra to arrive in Canterlot, and for Queen Chrysalis to put two and two together. There was a chance that Chrysalis might be fooled by Bon Bon’s pretense, when she had talked to Princess Luna and Shining Armor, that she was a spirit possessing a pony and not a changeling, but if so the queen wouldn’t stay fooled for long. She stepped back from Aldrovanda, ears pinned against her head and eyes wide. “I have to go. I have to save her. I have to go now.”

The kelpie cocked her head. “Have you not listened to a single word I said? Unless you’re having second thoughts about my suggestion that you kill—” Aldrovanda paused, and blinked. “Wait, ‘forgets about them?’ Was that just your accent playing tricks on me, or did you actually say that? Perhaps you changelings are more needy than I realized, but that doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Oh no, she’s very nice about it. She drags you down to some lost cave miles under the surface, leaves you in the dark with no food, no water, and no idea where the exit is, and then—forgets about you.” Bon Bon turned her back on Aldrovanda, still sprawled against the wall, and made for the open door. “I’ve already been to Canterlot, and told them everything I know. Chrysalis doesn’t have any reason left to care whether Lyra lives or...or...” She swallowed again, and forced her ears to stand straight and her tail to flow free. She would *not* let this creature see her fear. In a steadier voice, she continued, “I have to go. My marefriend needs me.”

With a flailing and clattering that was probably less graceful than she had intended, Aldrovanda righted herself. “As if she’s still alive! Come now, Bon Bon, surely even you can see that—”

“Bite iron, kelpie.” Bon Bon kicked the door shut in Aldrovanda’s face and trotted downstairs.

Iron. That wasn’t a bad idea. She might well need to fight before this was over, and the last thing that a Shee would expect would be for one of their own kind to be carrying faebane. It wouldn’t be much use against the likes of Chrysalis, of course, but against lesser Shee it might well make all the difference. Most of the household implements that she and Lyra owned were made of brass or copper, for obvious reasons, but she thought she remembered an old iron poker that lay buried in some chest or other. If it didn’t have a wooden guard, it could always be wrapped in cloth or something of that nature so she could safely hold it.

From upstairs, there came the sounds of a kelpie engaged in battle with advanced pony technology, represented by a doorknob. Judging from the rattling and cursing, the doorknob was winning. Bon Bon ignored the sounds, lit a candle, and continued searching for the poker, mentally reviewing the other things she’d be likely to need. Bread might be a good idea. As a changeling, she couldn’t eat it herself, but fresh-baked bread was a very homely, real sort of thing; just the smell alone would keep her anchored in reality, and might also drive off some of the eerier kinds of Shee who had trouble existing anywhere but in Faerie. A few quarts of water would definitely be wise, along with a map, enough bits to take care of the train ride there and back (and a little more for emergencies), flint and tinder, and a length of good, stout rope in case the worst happened and she had to seek out Lyra somewhere deep underground. She still had no clue where her saddlebag was, though, and Lyra’s was somewhere in Canterlot. Bon Bon took a moment to berate herself for having been so incredibly stupid as to have just left it lying there, with the incriminating list and the lyre clasp and—well, that was in the past, and there was no point in worrying about it now. It wasn’t as if it could make things any worse than they already were.

Still, the saddlebag would be a problem; she might not be planning to take much with her, but what she was taking was unwieldy. She could always buy another saddlebag—what did bits matter anymore?—but time was precious, and if she wanted to catch the morning train to Canterlot messing about in the markets wasn’t a good idea. Early as it was, the first tentative glow of dawn was already glimmering in at the windows, filling in the shadows cast by her candle. If only she had somepony she could send for a replacement...

There was a sudden sound of splintering wood, several cracks and metallic thuds, and a muffled “I *loathe* doors” from somewhere over Bon Bon’s head. The not-quite-pony sighed, and made an addendum to her earlier wish. If only she had somepony to send for a replacement saddlebag, and a way to get rid of Aldrovanda. A moment later the kelpie clomped down the stairs, the pebbles covering her hooves clacking noisily with each step. A few slivers of broken wood and a doorknob hanging jauntily from her left ear had now joined the rest of the detritus clinging to her body. She nodded irritably towards the upper story, and said, “You’ll be wanting to pick up another one of those round bronze devices. It was holding the door shut with some kind of gramarye, and I’m afraid I may have slightly, ah, destroyed it. My sincerest apologies.” The ragged Shee paused, and eyed Bon Bon. “Far be it from me to criticize your face, by the by, but honestly I think I prefer it when you scowl at me. That smile is positively unnerving. I’m willing to take your impeccable dental care on faith, you know. You don’t have to show me every last incisor.”

“Sorry,” hissed Bon Bon, grimacing cheerfully. “I just had an idea, that’s all. Aldrovanda, how would you like to go shopping?”

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The sun was still below the horizon, but only just, and Bon Bon was now clad in her normal pony form, pawing through the heap of items she had piled in the anteroom. She’d decided that, for lack of a saddlebag, tying everything up in a pillowcase and making it into a bindle would have to do. It wasn’t ideal, of course; she’d need to hobble along with one hoof held up to keep the bindle from falling off, and anything in the nature of a gallop would be completely out of the question. She’d seen some ponies—typically earth ponies, for whatever reason—balance parcels like these without needing to hobble along on three legs, but she had never been able to figure out how they did it, and they’d never quite been able to explain.

Still, it was all she had to work with; she wasn’t holding her breath waiting for Aldrovanda’s return. Although the kelpie had agreed to head to the marketplace and buy a saddlebag with surprisingly little backchat, Bon Bon expected her to make a beeline for Froggy Bottom Bog and stay there. That was, honestly, the whole point of sending her off in the first place: to get rid of her with as little fuss as possible. If she came back with a saddlebag, great, but if she didn’t—well, even better. As she looped the loose end of the pillowcase around a broomstick, Bon Bon muttered, “I doubt she’s even familiar with the concept of money.” She drew the slack through the loop with her teeth, tugged it tight, and spitting out the cloth added to herself, “Wouldn’t be surprised if she ate the bits I gave her.”

“You wound me, Mendax,” drawled a far-too-familiar voice. Bon Bon started, and raising her gaze saw Aldrovanda, disguised as Lyra once more, peering in through one of the open ground-floor windows and eyeing Bon Bon’s hoofwork with a patronizing grin. “I haven’t been up there in some time, of course, but I used to make the occasional sojourn amongst your little ponies for various reasons—I won’t go into the details, they’d only distress you—and I kept my eyes open. I’m quite familiar with the basic drill: ask shopkeep for price of object, haggle if necessary, toss over the requested sum, and take the goods. If there are no witnesses, devour shopkeep.” The kelpie licked her fangs wistfully. “Shame that last item didn’t really pan out today.”

“It’s ‘Bon Bon.’ Go away.”

“‘Go away?’ Now look, you’ve gone and wounded me *again*. This is really starting to become a habit with you. I tolerate your frankly insulting attitude, run your pointless little errands, brave the twee banality of a Ponyville marketplace, devour absolutely no one—no pony, I mean, of course—and all you have to offer in return is more rudeness! The stalls were all *pink*, Dum Dum! Pink! Some of them even had little hearts and candies on them! And not the meaty kind of heart, dripping with blood, but the sappy kind, dripping with—with sap. Or something. It was horrifying, is the point.”

Bon Bon said nothing, and hoisted the bundle up. Aldrovanda blinked. “Are you honestly planning to trek all the way from here to Canterlot carting that whatever-it-is with you? But I brought a saddlebag!”

Bon Bon paused, bundle hanging awkwardly off her back. “You did?”

“Of course I did. Do you suppose I returned solely for the sake of making devastatingly witty remarks? Don’t kid yourself. You’re a good foil, but you aren’t *that* good.”

“Well, I, uh...” The faux-pony blinked and slid the bundle off her back. “That’s great, then. Um. Thank you, Aldrovanda. Toss it over.”

A snaggletoothed smile spread its way across the kelpie’s face. “Ah, yes, I thought we might hit this stumbling block. I’m terribly sorry, but I can’t quite manage that. You see,” she finished apologetically, “the saddlebag is dry.”

Neither of them spoke for a moment. The puzzled changeling waited for Aldrovanda to say something more, but apparently she felt that the saddlebag being dry was a sufficiently impressive fact all by itself.

“It’s dry, and...?”

Aldrovanda smiled indulgently. “Well, I could hardly drag your lovely new saddlebag through the streets, could I? It would have gotten dirty. So, without really thinking through all the consequences, I slung it on to my back—and here we are.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t quite follow.”

“I’m a kelpie!”

“And I’m a pony—well, changeling, technically, but you know what I mean—that’s a door, and this is a house. Is this another one of those ‘You’re boring, therefore I foalnapped your marefriend and took a bath’ things? Because I am not in the mood for more of—”

“No no no no no.” Aldrovanda tossed her damp mane in exasperation, scattering stale, fishy-smelling droplets. “Bless your traitorous little heart, you’ve quite forgotten what it is to be of the Court, haven’t you? I’m a kelpie—you remember what a kelpie is, yes?—and like all good kelpies, I hunt my food by tricking it, one way or another, into touching me. As long as the dear little morsel is dry it sticks fast to my hide, upon which I drag it underwater, wait for it to drown, and munch merrily away. If it’s wet, on the other hoof, it doesn’t stick; that way I don’t end up covered in random bits of detritus floating around in the water. Is that quite simple enough for you, or should I draw a diagram to make it clearer?”

Honestly, the wretched creature couldn’t be more obnoxious if she tried—or tried harder than she already was trying, at least. With an effort Bon Bon suppressed her first impulse, which while not entirely clear in her mind almost certainly would have involved a good deal of screaming, and answered, “I know how kelpies hunt, yes. I didn’t know about the wet-dry thing, though; I just sort of figured you could choose what you stuck to. I suppose that explains why you were in the bathtub, at any rate.”

Aldrovanda nodded. “Precisely. It was the only thing in your funny little home I could find that was able to hold both me and a hogshead or two of water.”

“The saddlebag’s glued to your back, then.” Bon Bon paused. “Permanently?”

Aldrovanda chuckled, amused by the quaint notion. “Don’t be foolish. It’s made of cloth; it’ll rot off eventually. That’s how I get rid of the bits of my meals that end up stuck to me.”

“And all the other junk stuck to you? The pebbles? The doorknob? Those won’t rot off.”

A rare look of unease flickered across the kelpie's toothy face. "Well, I...I don't personally know how to remove those things, no. I don't normally come up on land unless it's recently rained, so until now the issue never came up. But there must be some way. I'll ask around." She twitched an ear as if to shoo away an irritating fly, and continued, "But that's beside the point, my dear Mendax. As I said, I'm afraid I can't just give you the saddlebag. Be of good cheer, though! A beam of sunlight shines through the clouds! I've just now discovered that you possess a remarkably winning personality, and I feel like helping you. Load me up with your assorted trinkets and adventuresome doodads, then, and I shall be your pack mule. Let's get this fool's errand on the road!"

Bon Bon's eyes narrowed. "'Bon Bon.' And you can't possibly expect me to believe that you're serious."

"Why not? It's so *boring* here, Bon Bon! I want life, laughter, gaiety, ha-cha-cha! And that's hard to find in a swamp. Now, don't get me wrong; I still think your little quest is abysmally idiotic and will almost certainly end in your messy death. But hey, as long as it isn't *too* messy and there's a reasonable-sized chunk of you left, I still come out on top. Dinner and a show, if you see my point."

"You are an unholy abomination and an affront to reality itself."

"Oh, shush. I bet you say that to all the fillies. How about it, though? It'd make your task much easier."

The horrible thing was, she was *right*. Bon Bon sighed. This was probably a stupid idea... "Fine." She nudged up the latch and pulled the front door open. Aldrovanda sidled in, glaring suspiciously at the door as if she suspected it of something nefarious. "Whatever. Here, stand still while I load you up."

Aldrovanda glanced back as Bon Bon began lifting various things up and tossing them into the saddlebag. "Is all of this really necessary? Like I said, the odds of her even being alive are awfully slim, so you might as well just *Yaaaa!*"

"Sho shorry," said Bon Bon, holding the wooden guard of the iron poker in her mouth. "It shlipped."

"Indeed," hissed Aldrovanda. "Anything else you'll be bringing that I should know about? A sheaf of poisoned darts? Perhaps a pet nuckelavee?" She shivered as Bon Bon added a loaf of bread to the bag. "Ugh! What was—everything feels—*Ugh!* It's like suddenly the whole universe is watching me—like I'll never be able to hide again. How

did you *do* that? Can normal ponies do that? Never mind,” she continued hurriedly, “I really think I’d prefer not to know. Are you done yet? Got everything in?”

Bon Bon tugged a strap through the saddlebag’s buckle, fastened it, and gave a curt nod. The kelpie smirked nastily. “Excellent.” With a sudden leap she scooted back out the door, swerved right, and galloped off down the street, pebble-shod hooves clattering against the packed dirt. As she sped off she shouted back, “Sorry, changed my mind! Good luck with your quest!”

Yep, agreeing to let her help had been a stupid idea. Bon Bon stood frozen for a moment in the doorway of her home. Then, deliberately and with careful enunciation, she said several words that most ponies would have been ashamed to admit that they even knew.

Then she said them again.

With adjectives.

Ponyville was far too small to be one of the Canterlots, Manehattans, or Bayjings of Equestria, gliding regally along on their great business and paying little real attention to the daily dance of the Sun and Moon. It had long since ceased, too, to be one of the skittish frontier towns like Appleloosa and Dodge Junction, hesitant to sleep and lurching awake in panic before dawn. The Everfree Forest, near as it might be, had long ago learned to respect the might of Canterlot, and safe beneath the watchful gaze of the Sun Princess the little village had grown sleepy and comfortable. It believed in getting its solid eight hours of sleep, and then maybe getting two or three more, just for good measure.

It was no strange thing, then, that as Bon Bon stumbled three-legged to the ticket depot of the Ponyville train station, crude bindle waving wildly over her shoulder as she struggled to carry it without tumbling to the ground herself, she should have found herself the first and only customer. She had considered, in the first wild rush of panic after Aldrovanda had made off with all her carefully-gathered supplies, simply shedding her earth pony form, transforming into a pegasus, and taking to the skies—but she was tired. Exhausted, in fact. She hadn't slept in twenty-four hours, hadn't felt the filling warmth of Lyra's love for nearly as long, and she had performed more transformations in the last night than during the past ten years put together. Try even one more, and she'd have trouble staying on all four hooves, let alone flying. She could probably still manage traveling to Canterlot on hoof, if absolutely necessary (transformations were *very* draining), but the train would be faster and would leave her in much better shape to deal with—with whatever needed dealing with. Not that she was in very good shape now, of course.

Bon Bon snorted irritably and pushed those thoughts from her mind. No sense in mentally defeating herself before she'd even started out. She trotted up to the ticket seller's booth, glass-fronted and smelling of freshly-sawn wood, and snorted again a bit more irritably. Despite the brass placard by the booth confidently stating that business hours began at sunrise and ended at midnight, the ticket seller was nowhere to be seen. Bon Bon leaned her bindle against one of the wooden beams in the timber frame wall, and peered through the booth's window, trying—without much hope—to catch a glimpse of the missing ticket seller through the open door of some back room or other, perhaps sipping a dandelion root latté or polishing off a late breakfast.

No such luck. The ticket office, sparsely furnished and all business and professionalism (it was almost depressing, really. Only a few candy-colored arabesques, not too many hearts carved into the pale blue walls—not up to Ponyville's usual interior decorating

standards at all. Then again, it was a new building; perhaps they just hadn't had time to get somepony in to do it up properly), showed a distinct lack of employees, other than a few sleepy-looking stallions chatting in the back who, to judge from the tool bags slung over their backs, were part of some sort of maintenance crew. Waiting seemed to be the only option. The changeling mare sighed, lowered herself to a sitting position on the wooden platform abutting the rails, and tried not to think about the many, many things that might have already happened to Lyra.

About ten minutes later, Bon Bon had very definitely not thought about caverns miles beneath Equestria's surface, bugganes, vengeful changeling queens with flint axes to grind, bugganes, or ancient rituals involving more chanting than is generally found in polite society. She was not thinking about bugganes for the third time that morning, and was particularly not thinking about the rumors she'd heard that there was a colony of the things somewhere deep underground near Canterlot, when her totally-not-a-worryfest was interrupted by an odd sound somewhere nearby: a rhythmic clumping, as if a very large and very clumsy stallion was trying to make his way towards the train station or a normal pony with weights on her hooves was—with weights on her hooves—weights. Surely not. Bon Bon gritted her teeth and, rising to her hooves, glanced around the corner to see a pale green, tousle-maned unicorn that she could almost have mistaken for Lyra were it not for the newcomer's goat-like eyes, dripping mane, and snaggletoothed smirk.

...Along with, of course, the doorknob attached to her ear, saddlebag glued to her back, pebbles coating her hooves, and a surprisingly wide variety of other kinds of detritus clinging here and there, including a rather pretty flower perched in her mane, which the newcomer had almost certainly not added intentionally. Lyra, eccentric as she sometimes was, had never been prone to decorating herself in Aldrovanda's caddisfly larvae-like style. The kelpie, catching sight of Bon Bon around the edge of the train station, tried to give a lazy, indifferent toss of her mane but ended up smacking herself in the side of her head with the doorknob instead, where it promptly stuck fast. She clutched her head and started muttering something incomprehensible but almost certainly uncouth (all Bon Bon caught were the words “—smelt it, smelt it, *smelt* it, gnaw chase-discord with iron bells ringing—”), and from the sound of it probably would have gone along in that vein for quite some time if Bon Bon hadn't curtly demanded what she wanted.

“—And stick 'em with a wiggin stick. Ow,” finished the kelpie, and attempted a smirk. “I'm disappointed in you, Mendax. Truly, I am. I needled you mercilessly, was an accessory—unwilling, granted, but an accessory—to the snatching of your pet, stole all the little essential trinkets you'd gathered for your astonishingly ill-conceived rescue mission, and to top it all off I persist in calling you 'Mendax' instead of—what was it

again? Dum Dum? Something like that.” She started to give another careless toss of her mane and stopped when she remembered what had happened the last time. “Honestly. What do I have to do to get a little pursuit?”

Bon Bon snarled, baring very un-pony-like fangs. “This—You—I can’t believe you!”

“I am rather incredible, aren’t I? Hard as it might be to credit, though, I’m only implausible, not actually impossible.”

The changeling ignored her. “This is all just a game to you, isn’t it? Just a fun little game of Bait the Changeling. Well, I don’t feel like playing. Leave me alone.”

“Oh come now, Mendax, humor me. Just a little chase? I’ll almost let you catch me, I promise.”

“Not interested. Go away.” Bon Bon turned, trotted back around the corner of the building, and planted herself firmly in front of the still-absent ticket seller’s booth. Aldrovanda sidled after her, cast an inquisitive glance at the booth, looked to Bon Bon, then back to the booth.

“So...what’s this wooden box all about? Some sort of shrine?”

“It’s a ticket booth. I’m waiting for the pony that *should* have been here half an hour ago to arrive, so that I can buy a ticket and save Lyra.”

Aldrovanda raised her eyebrows, impressed. “They sell tickets for that?”

If only. “It’s for a train, kelpie. A sort of traveling box on wheels that’ll take me to Canterlot. Why are you still here?”

Aldrovanda yawned, and stretched herself. “I find your obtuseness enthralling, that’s all. I have your stuff, you need your stuff, I run away, you run after—is this concept really so difficult for you to wrap your little mind around?”

Okay, that was it. “Leave me *alone*, you horrible little thing! Just leave me alone! I don’t care what you steal, I don’t care how snarky you are, I don’t care how sly and capricious and fey you are. I am going to save Lyra and nothing—do you hear me? *Nothing!*—is going to distract me from that! If I had to, I would *walk* to Canterlot!” Bon Bon stepped forward. Aldrovanda stepped back. The little old gray-maned ticket seller, unnoticed by both of them, stepped into his booth. “Go back to your swamp, mimic half of Ponyville, report me to Chrysalis—I don’t care. Just leave me the hay alone. Do you understand?”

“But Mendax, I—”

“Bite iron. Conveniently, there’s a bar of it in the saddlebag on your back. You’ll find it in the left satchel. What,” she snapped, whirling around with a snarl to face the ticket seller, who had been tapping on the glass of the booth and trying to get her attention, “do *you* want?”

The ticket seller shrank into himself, peering nervously out from behind his whiskers and making squeaking noises. Bon Bon briefly considered demanding how much he had heard, but rejected this notion. Bad enough that he thought she was insane; she didn’t need him thinking she was criminally so. The not-quite-pony drew a deep breath, and forced her ears back up into a friendly, peaceable position. Rearranging her scowl into something that, even in poor light, would still probably not have been mistaken for a cheery smile, she said, “Sorry. Didn’t mean to snap at you. Name’s Bon Bon. One ticket for the morning train to Canterlot, please.”

There was the clink of bits—about all she had to spare, as most of her savings were in the saddlebag on that wretched kelpie’s back—against the wooden counter. The elderly pony swiped the bits into the booth and then, after some clumsy bustling with a roll of tickets and a cutting device that had clearly not been designed with an earth pony in mind, he nudged a ticket through a slot in the window. Snatching it up in her teeth, Bon Bon managed something more closely approximating a real smile, and nodded thanks. The ticket seller, emboldened by this, peered to his right and asked, “Will your friend be wanting a ticket too, then?”

Bon Bon glanced at Aldrovanda, who waved meekly, and said, “Distant acquaintance. *Extremely* distant acquaintance. And no, she will not. Where will the Friendship Express be pulling in? Over there? Thank you.” She turned and hobbled three-legged off in the direction the ticket seller had indicated, bundle slung awkwardly over her back.

Aldrovanda watched her go, eyes half-lidded and lips pursed, and then she trotted up to the ticket seller’s booth. Giving him her most winning smile, she said, “Name’s, uh, Lyra. One ticket for the morning—um, what she said. ‘Train to Canterlot,’ wasn’t it? Yes. One of those.”

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Miraculously, absolutely no major outrages were committed in the time between Aldrovanda’s purchase of the ticket and the arrival of the Friendship Express at the station. This was not for lack of motivation; on the contrary, as soon as she realized that

the kelpie intended to join her on the trip to Canterlot, Bon Bon found herself feeling that a few major outrages, ideally inflicted on Aldrovanda in as painful a manner as possible, would be just what the doctor ordered.

Her forbearance likely had something to do with the presence of several fellow travelers, finally arriving to purchase their tickets, along with the attention of the ticket seller, whose job was not a particularly exciting one and who was very obviously watching the two of them in the hopes that they'd continue being odd. Bon Bon, an old master at being boring, proved a disappointment to him, but Aldrovanda was rather more entertaining. After trying and failing to engage Bon Bon in further conversation, she ended up sidling back to his booth and began chatting with him. She was, he felt, quite a nice young mare; it was such a shame about her teeth and eyes, which (she explained) were the result of a congenital condition which she didn't like to talk about. She seemed, for some strange reason, to have trouble believing that the train to Ponyville was really called the "Friendship Express," and after he assured her that it was so she inquired as to whether the names "Happy Happy Fun Train" or "Hearts and Happiness Railways" had already been taken. For no reason that he could see, she collapsed into hysterical laughter when he admitted that Fillydelphia had beaten them to the latter name, but after wheezing a bit and repeating "*Fillydelphia!*" once or twice, she managed to pull herself together, and after learning that he and his family had recently moved to Ponyville, she began to describe the beauties of Froggy Bottom Bog to him, explaining that its bad reputation was an exaggeration. There was no danger at all, she said. He should really take a walk there sometime; make a party of it, bring the wife and foals along, go for a swim...

It was at this point that Bon Bon, who had been paying no attention to the conversation with such determination that it looked like she was about to sprain a muscle, trotted over, bit down on one of the saddlebag's loose straps, and yanked Aldrovanda away, muttering furiously past the cloth in her mouth.

"Oo defpiable, e'el, mufferuff, wiyuh, fyopaffih, oaffuh—" She spat the strap out of her mouth. "—sociopathic, cannibalistic, wretched—"

"Ponies are waa-aaatching, 'Bon Bon,'" warbled the kelpie, "and technically speaking, I'm not cannibalistic. Well," she added in an undertone, "not since the exile. Honestly, I don't know why Queen Xubidu made such a fuss; he was already dead when I found him, after all, and it wasn't like I...wasn't like..." Her shrill voice wavered and trailed off into silence, her snide smirk shifting to an expression of pure horror. She stumbled back, eyes fixed on something behind Bon Bon, and screeched, "Epona and Danu! What is that *thing!*?"

Bon Bon whirled around, muscles tensed and ready for flight, and then relaxed. About time. “That,” she said, turning to the cowering kelpie, “would be the train.”

“Ah. Yes. Of course.” Aldrovanda stared up at the train as it drew level with the platform, free ear plastered flat against her head and doorknob-encumbered ear bent back as far as it would go. “‘Box on wheels,’ you said. So it is. Fancy tha—*what was that is it supposed to do that?*”

“That’s a train whistle. It’s harmless.”

“I see.”

Bon Bon hobbled towards the door of the train, ticket in her mouth and bundle on her back, and Aldrovanda followed, eyes still glued on the smoke-belching, iron-laced artifact of pony technology looming over their heads. For once, she had nothing snarky to say about candy-themed decorations; the sheer size of the machine seemed to have impressed her too much for that. It was a shame, Bon Bon reflected, that she hadn’t been scared away by it completely, but at least the wretched Shee wasn’t likely to get her in any trouble during the ride.

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“Do they normally throw passengers out of trains like that?” asked Aldrovanda.

Bon Bon didn’t appear to have heard her. The changeling was slumped by the side of the railway tracks, five hours from Ponyville and Celestia knew how many hours from Canterlot, staring glumly at the rapidly shrinking train as it sped off into the distance, slowly rising up the mountain foothills. Canterlot itself was just visible far above, its delicate spires and towers lightly grasping the rocky bones of the Canterhorn like a cluster of titanic icicles dangling impossibly up into the sky. It looked surreal and untouchable, and horribly far away.

Which, unfortunately, it was. Bon Bon brought her gaze down, surveying the miles of low-lying, boggy countryside that lay between her and Lyra. The Canterhorn was not a natural mountain; its origins weren’t really known, but Bon Bon had heard legends describing how, in the distant past, Celestia had raised it as a memorial to her corrupted and banished sister—

Aldrovanda, who seemed to be feeling that not enough attention was being paid to her, piped up, “Honestly, it wasn’t really my fault. You could have explained the concept of a restroom to me before we got on the train.”

—Or had once been a great valley, rich and full of life, that Discord had inverted to the heavens thousands of years earlier in a divine prank—

“As for the windows, I consider myself blameless. They looked wet to me; how was I to know that they weren’t and that I’d stick to them if I touched them? Nasty stuff, glass, by the way. How do ponies make it? Some kind of salivary secretion, I suppose? It *does* decay, yes?”

—Or that it was the tailings of Tartarus, cast up from the deeps when Celestia and Luna had first dug out that cavernous prison for all the worst monstrosities created by Discord during his reign—

“And I think that, in all fairness, I deserve to be praised for trying to eat the seat cushions. Granted, I had no reason to suppose that they were edible, but I was getting peckish and I knew how you’d fuss if I ate one of the other passengers. I really think a more levelheaded conductor would have contented himself with a reprimand, particularly after I explained to him how it was really all your fault because I was mentally unstable and you were supposed to be looking after me.”

—Or (this, told by the Shee; Bon Bon wasn’t fond of their legends, but she was running out of thoughts to distract herself from Aldrovanda’s prattle. Any port in a storm) that it was the first and the greatest menhir, carved and set in the earth by Epona Herself, and that eventually the Stone-Shod Queen would wake from Her multimillennial slumber and strike the Sun Princess’ castle from the crest of the Canterhorn, casting it down in crumbling ruin to the valley below and cleansing Her menhir of the blasphemy that had been committed against it.

“I thought for sure he’d see it was all a big misunderstanding, and then we’d laugh about how silly we’d all been. I suppose, in retrospect, I shouldn’t have told him all that while you were asleep. Rather gave the impression you were shirking your duties, now that I think about it.”

Whatever the truth was, the Canterhorn was something separate and apart from the mountains nearby, a towering iceberg of stone resting in the soil of the central Equestrian valley. Over the millennia the earth beneath it had slowly buckled, creaking down into a vast bowl that had just as slowly filled with silt and water to create a great sunken bogland.

“Still, like I said, a more sensible conductor would have...” Aldrovanda cocked her head, glass shards embedded in her mane clinking against the doorknob. “Mendax, are you even listening to me?”

It was not an ideal landscape for traveling on hoof, but thanks to—Bon Bon shook her head. Best to avoid thinking about...the thing making noises next to her. Naiacidal rages, cathartic as they might be, would only end up being a distraction from the matter at hoof. Best get going. The pale yellow changeling sighed, hoisted her bundle up on her back, and set off alongside the railway bed, hopping and stumbling her three-hooved and sleep-deprived way towards Lyra. Aldrovanda, who had been occupied in trying to detach fragments of cushion from her face and was so far failing miserably, glanced up at the sound of Bon Bon’s departure. She stared after the departing changeling for a moment and gave an enormous, toothy yawn—she might not have been up as long as Bon Bon had, but the night was her time for wakefulness, and all this trotting around under the sun was leaving her feeling drowsy. With a clunk and a clatter she rose to her hooves, cast one quick, suspicious glance at the steel train tracks, and trotted after Bon Bon.

Candlelight flickered off little brassy bits scattered over the flagstones beneath Bon Bon's hooves and sank into the rich red-brown of the wooden beams above, filling the cellar with a warm, comforting glow. The brassy bulk of the f-ing-er loomed overhead, the whirring click of its gears occasionally interrupted by a puff of steam as it quietly chuffed along. Lounging awkwardly back in her padded armchair in the corner, one hoof curled around a mug of mulled cider, Lyra grinned as Bon Bon rose unsteadily to her hind legs, forehooves waving wildly as she tried to keep her balance—

—shifted her left hind leg back, in a motion that would have helped her stay upright if she had been on all four hooves, but as it was just threw her even more out of kilter—

—and fell in a spinning tangle of limbs on a heap of cushions, laughing helplessly at how ridiculous the whole thing was. Lyra wriggled out of the chair and trotted over, laughing as well. “C'mon, silly filly, you can do better than that!” She helped Bon Bon to her hooves, and brushed a stray lock of navy blue hair back into place in her marefriend's disheveled mane. “If I can do it, I know you can.”

Bon Bon smiled. “I don't have your determination, sweetie, and you're in better shape. I'm all pudgy.”

Lyra nuzzled Bon Bon's mane, nickering softly. “Yeah, and I love every bit of that pudge. Ow! Ow! No nipping!”

“After making me try to trot around on my hind hooves like a chicken, I think you deserve a nip or two,” said Bon Bon primly.

Lyra chuckled, and gave her marefriend a gentle push. “Okay, you don't have to try it anymore tonight. I haven't given up on you yet, though. I'm going to keep you at it, and one day, filly, we're going to walk out our front door hoof-in-hoof, marching along on our hind legs as bold as can be, and we'll dang well out-awesome everypony else in town. We'll be like some kind of awesome-plosion. They'll be talking about it for—” A sudden klaxon wail of sound, the rather-too-familiar screech of the fire alarm, echoed down from upstairs. Lyra's face brightened. “Ooh! Dinner's ready! Just a sec, Bon Bon, I'll be right back. I'm trying a new recipe; you'll love it.” She turned and galloped up the cellar steps, taking them two at a time. Bon Bon smiled, and began to clean things up a bit, picking lost cogs up from the floor and stacking loose sheets of paper neatly on Lyra's work desk. Overhead the fire alarm lapsed into silence, and then there was a clatter and thud, followed by a muted “It's okay! I'm okay!”

It was mad, it was chaotic, it was disorganized and impossible and strange. It was home. Bon Bon rolled her eyes, trotted over to the corner where Lyra had been sitting, and was reaching down to retrieve a cushion that Lyra had stashed in the back of the armchair's seat (so *that* was how she had managed to sit there so comfortably) when a drop of cold water splashed on her nose. She glanced up at the labyrinth of copper piping overhead, sighed, and headed for the stairs. She wasn't about to mess with the impossibly complicated innards of the fing-er; that was her marefriend's territory, and for all Bon Bon knew the leak was something that the absent-minded unicorn had intentionally included in her design of the machine, without pausing to consider little everyday mundanities like water damage.

"Lyra? Lyra, I think the fing-er may be—" She stopped abruptly, blinking. Another drop of water had fallen, splashing into her open eye. That was strange; none of the pipes extended this—

Drip. Drip. Drip drip splash plip splish. Bon Bon leapt back, shaking her mane. Water was falling from the ceiling in a steady drizzle now, pouring down on her and pattering against the floor. There was a rolling boom of sound from somewhere very far away, and nearer at hoof Bon Bon heard something very like the croaking of frogs...

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Bon Bon's eyes snapped open. She lay curled on her side in the middle of a stand of stringy yellow flowers growing on a small knoll of ground rising above the surrounding swampland. A vast, weighty mass of clouds was spread across the sky overhead, drenching the expanse of marsh grass and stunted willow trees with sheets of rain. The sun was still just below the horizon, but enough of the early dawn light had worked its way through the overcast sky to cast a dim light over the swamp, interrupted here and there by the unsteady weaving and bobbing of the will-o'-the-wisps' green lanterns.

And Lyra was gone.

Bon Bon clenched her eyes shut again, shivering, and curled her legs tightly against her body, tensing the muscles in her sides until her ribs hurt. She could feel a convulsive tightening in her chest, and a pressing at her throat, and tried to force the tears back without much success. She couldn't show weakness now, not with the kelpie so close; she couldn't.

But Lyra was gone. She might even be dead. Bon Bon's self control cracked and collapsed, and she began to blubber into the brown sheets of bog moss, her body shaking

as great heaving sobs forced their way out. She was scared, so scared, so very, terribly scared...

The rain fell, hissing and whispering as the droplets splashed from willow-frond to grass stem to sphagnum moss to stagnant pool. After some time had passed, the bedraggled changeling managed to rise to her hooves, eyes red and breath ragged. She swallowed, forcing one last convulsive sob back down her throat, and looked up, staring at the dim silhouette of Canterlot far above. Since yesterday afternoon it had been enclosed in a colossal, pale red sphere of magic—presumably the Princesses' response to her warning. Most likely a shield of some sort. They—and Bon Bon—had been too late, of course; the enemy was already inside the fortress. The changeling mare drew a deep breath, bent down and gingerly nipped off one of the yellow flowers growing around her, wincing at the cold, ringing shiver of the stem against her teeth. It was Mage Starswirl's wort, an ancient form of faebane that the Shee knew as chase-discord; she had purposefully sought out this little stand of flowers the night before, carefully weeding out a little poison-free hollow in the middle of the bobbing yellow stalks so that she could be sure that, here in the strange Unseelie Wild, she wouldn't find herself slipping away into Faerie while she slept. With great care, she tucked the little flower into her mane, and even as her ears tingled, instinctively twitching away from the five-pointed blossom, she felt a little twinge of relief. It could have just been the steadily brightening light of dawn, but she thought that the drunken, whirling glow of the will-o'-the-wisps had faded a bit. The world felt slightly more real.

She would *not* be too late again.

Bon Bon glanced around, taking stock of her surroundings. Aldrovanda was nowhere to be seen, and considering that she normally slept during the day in any case that probably meant that she was still fast asleep, curled up in the muck at the bottom of the pool into which she had descended the previous evening. Bon Bon's bindle, which she had leaned against a nearby willow the night before to keep it off the wet ground, was gone; no doubt Aldrovanda had waited for her to go to sleep, and had then tossed it into the mire, or eaten it, or buried it, or...whatever the foul little thing felt like doing at the time.

Which meant, of course, that Aldrovanda would be expecting to be woken up by an angry changeling demanding to have it returned, and wouldn't anticipate that Bon Bon might head off without it. Bon Bon shrugged. Well, if that was the price she had to pay to get rid of the kelpie, she was more than happy to pay it. Giving Aldrovanda the slip would mean avoiding the railway bed, of course, which would make her journey somewhat more difficult, but on the other hoof the Canterhorn was a landmark that was

impossible to miss, and when all was said and done Bon Bon was still one of the Shee. She knew how to travel through the wilderness.

The Sun rose, reached its zenith, and began to descend again, dipping down towards the western mountains, and a lone changeling trudged on through the great sodden depression surrounding the Canterhorn. It was a lonely place, this swamp; a very lonely place. There had been no ponies here for uncounted years, that was plain enough, but as Bon Bon trekked through the mire, threading her way along the few patches of stable ground, she began to realize that even the Shee rarely ventured here. In between the willows and the marsh grasses lay stagnant pools ringed with sphagnum moss and lanky flowers. Early in the season as it was, their anemic stalks were already sending out sprays of flowers, daubing the landscape with tiny points of pale yellow, translucent white, and bruised purples so deep they were almost black. Scattered among the other flowers were yet more stalks of chase-discord, growing not in tight, paranoid clusters or in defiant hordes but just as any other flower would, as if they had no special properties at all. The long, low-slung hummocks of peat and moss that rose, here and there, above the slowly drifting waters and the shifting clouds of gnats were not barrows, raised in the paleopony period as burial mounds for gold-clad chieftains or as homage to the far greater kings and queens of the Shee; they were just hills of sod, no more and no less, overgrown with gnarled willows and riddled with roots. Other than the wisps, weaving their mindless, glimmering way through the mists, there was almost nothing fey about the place at all.

It felt immensely strange. The settlements and cities of the ponies—Canterlot, Manehattan, and even Ponyville, at times—had always felt rushed to her, as if they were tumbling madly towards the future with little inclination to pause and savor the past. The Shee, on the other hoof, hoarded their past with a dragon-like jealousy, proud of their antiquity and immortality but suspicious of every new, untested moment of time. This sunken wetland, though, was different. Growing, rotting, and growing again in the shadow of the Canterhorn, old beyond reckoning—older than the Unseelie Court, perhaps older than the mythical Seelie Court, maybe even older than the Shee themselves—and yet it still wore its age gracefully. Almost carelessly, in fact. It existed, and that was enough for it. Into the Universe it came, and why not knowing, nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing: and out of it, as wind along the waste, it knew not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

Bon Bon came to a stop, and shook her head, irritated and amused with herself. Poetry! It might not be a haunt of the Shee, but something about this place was still getting to her. Reciting poetry—pfeh! She wasn't normally that flighty. Best be getting on.

Odd as it was, though, she found the swamp almost comforting. There was, quite simply, nothing here that was actively trying to foil her. It made for a welcome change. Perhaps, the changeling thought, things might yet turn out well...

“Mendax!”

Bon Bon froze at the sound of the distant voice, ringing shrilly out above the soft susurrating hiss of raindrops on willow leaves. No. Surely not. The kelpie would have followed the railway, if she even bothered pursuing at all; she should be miles away by now.

“*Mendax!* Oh, smelt it—*Bon Bon!*”

That sense of confidence, Bon Bon reflected, should have been her first warning sign that something was wrong. A sense of complacency and well-being anywhere within a radius of several hundred miles of Aldrovanda spelled doom. How had the miserable creature even *tracked* her this far out—

“Bon Bon! Please! *Please!* Where are you?”

Something resembling a train wreck took place in Bon Bon’s mind. Various lines of thought—a notion that finding a hiding place right now might be a good idea, a general distaste for kelpies, a particular distaste for one very specific kelpie—were suddenly thrown into disarray, whipping and snarling around one another like high-tension cables that had been suddenly cut. The changeling blinked. Yes, that had been Aldrovanda’s voice. Definitely.

But “please?” Aldrovanda didn’t say “please,” and Aldrovanda certainly didn’t say “please” in a plaintive, desperate tone. Aldrovanda didn’t do plaintive or desperate. She did snarky and belittling. What in Celestia’s name—There was a rustling amongst the nearby willows, a spreading of ripples through the scum-glazed pools. That puzzle could wait for later; she had to hide, she couldn’t let the kelpie find her again, couldn’t be slowed down by—

Branches cracked, foliage parted, and a kelpie-shaped heap of bog grasses, willow fronds, wooden splinters, pebbles, and other miscellanea tumbled out of a stand of reeds almost directly in front of the changeling. “Bon Bon! *Bon Bo—*” Aldrovanda stopped short at the sight of her quarry, who was currently staring right back at her with a complicated mixture of fury and utter bewilderment. “Rust and leaf beetles, I can’t believe I found

you! I was terrified, you have no idea, I thought that I'd be—" The kelpie realized what she was saying and stopped abruptly.

For a long moment, both of them were silent, and then in a voice colder than a wendigo's breath, Bon Bon said, "I'm taken."

Aldrovanda blinked, sending a feather glued to her right eyelid fluttering madly. "Taken? I'm afraid I don't—Oh. *Oh*. Epona, no! Believe me, I have no interest in your particular brand of perversity. The Beast has utterly failed to be charmed by, ah—" She eyed Bon Bon doubtfully. "—Beauty. So to speak."

"Then what do you want?"

"Well, uh, not much going on in this place, you know. Once you've seen one rotting lump of moss, you've seen them all. I crave entertainment, and your antics are—"

Bon Bon's eyes narrowed. "Liar."

"But Mendax, I assure you, I..."

"Go away or I attack." The changeling bared her teeth, and hissed, "I'm not going to tolerate you anymore." She cast one last venomous look at Aldrovanda, turned, and trotted away. The kelpie raised a hoof, held it outstretched for a moment, and then lowered it. She took a half-step forward, fear flashing across her narrow, bony face.

"But they'll kill me!"

Bon Bon glanced back. "What?"

Aldrovanda lowered her eyes, shoulders slumped, and repeated in a quieter tone of voice, "They'll kill me. The kelpies. The changelings. One or the other, I don't know which will get to me first. This was...I wasn't supposed to just give you the conditions of your pet—your marefriend's safety. I was also supposed to keep you from messing things up, keep you under control." She raised her eyes to meet Bon Bon's, and gestured desperately with one detritus-encrusted hoof. "But you're impossible! I try to convince you to give up, and you ignore me; I steal your saddlebag, and you head off with a bundle; I get you dumped in the middle of nowhere, with your marefriend somewhere at the top of a giant mountain and no sane way to reach her, and you just start *walking*! And then this morning you just ran off, and I thought I'd lost track of you completely, and that they'd do...do horrible iron-themed things to me. What is *wrong* with you? You just never stop!"

Bon Bon glared at her. “You’re my minder, then. Of course. With anypony else, I’d be shocked, but from you this doesn’t surprise me at all. What are you afraid of, though? I have to try to save her—I *have* to—but I know my odds aren’t good. The Court doesn’t care about me. If they did, they would have set somepony less useless than you to dog me—or they would have just done away with me, then and there. I don’t really matter. It doesn’t matter if you fail.”

“Yes,” Aldrovanda whined, “but my life is just as cheap as yours! I’m not actually a traitor, but I’m about as close as it’s possible to get. There were some strong objections in Queen Xubidu’s court to my lack of ferocity, and then there was that nasty thing with the kelpie crown prince, the deer, and the three hogsheads of molten beeswax—I really think the queen overreacted about that; he wasn’t even a very *good* prince, and she was always complaining about him—and then when I tried to hide and they found me, they let me live on condition that I look after you. And, well, I didn’t. Then that pair of changelings showed up, and told me to keep you under control or else—I was lucky they weren’t kelpies, otherwise they probably would have killed me then and there—and now I’m failing at that, too.” She moved a half step closer to Bon Bon, an unaccustomed pleading expression on her face. “I don’t want to die.”

“Doesn’t seem like it’s any of my business.”

“Bon Bon! Please!”

The changeling sighed. “Right, that was cruel. You deserve cruelty, mind, but I’m usually not one for doling it out. But what do you want from me? I’m not abandoning Lyra, not for you and not for anypony else.”

“Your strange obsession with her hadn’t escaped me, no.” Bon Bon directed a sharp glare at her, and the kelpie cringed back. “What? What did I say?”

“It’s not a—” Bon Bon paused. There wasn’t any point. “Forget it. Aldrovanda, I’m sorry you’re in trouble—but I’m in just as much trouble, and Lyra’s in even more. I can’t help you.”

The kelpie nervously rubbed her left forehoof against her right, the pebbles glued to both clicking noisily together. “But if you just go off unwatched, I’m as good as dead. Suppose I, ah, tagged along with you? So that if you get caught, I can say I was doing my job?”

Bon Bon blinked. “Are you serious? No! I’m not going to let you keep on trying to stop me just so that...”

“No, no! No more shenanigans. I promise. I’ll be an extremely satisfactory pack mule—or pack kelpie, as the case may be. The *ne plus ultra* of pack kelpies.” She gestured at the saddlebag on her back. “Everything’s still here, too. Granted, it might be just the tiniest bit damp, considering I spent last night at the bottom of a pond, but I’m sure some of the stuff in there is still usable, probably. All I want, *if* things go wrong, is for you to vouch for my efficiency and professionalism as your nemesis. You know, go into hysterics about how this is all my fault, how you’ll hunt me down to the end of time, maybe tell me to bite iron a few times—you’re fond of that particular obscenity, so that should be a positive pleasure for you, yes?”

“And in return, you’ll help me? No more nonsense? No more backchat?”

“Well, no more nonsense. A lack of backchat is going to be somewhat more difficult for me to manage.” The kelpie hazarded an uncertain smile, which slowly faded as Bon Bon continued to stare at her, face blank.

Finally, the changeling spoke. “I must be crazy. Fine. On condition that you do *nothing* to slow me down, you can come. The moment you start something funny, though, or the moment I even suspect you’re trying to stop me, you’re gone. Do you understand?”

Relief flooded across Aldrovanda’s face. “Perfectly. You are a paragon of lucidity, Mend—Bon Bon. You’ve made a wise decision.” She paused. “Well, to be entirely honest it’s really rather a stupid decision, considering precedent, but that notwithstanding it’ll still turn out well for you! You won’t regret this, I promise. Aren’t likely to regret it, at least. There is a greater than half-and-half chance that you won’t regret this. 70-30, we’ll say.” She paused again, considering. “Give or take.”

Bon Bon turned and resumed her march. “Just try to keep up.”

• • •

Somewhat to Bon Bon’s surprise, the kelpie was as good as her word, following with perfect docility as the changeling splashed and stumbled under the stunted willows, slowly making her way across the vast waterlogged basin towards the immense stone pillar at its center. Even better from Bon Bon’s point of view, despite the recent rain Aldrovanda seemed to prefer to stay off solid land, slithering through water weed-choked shallows instead. Occasionally she would kick her hind legs in the air and dive underwater, disappearing for tens of minutes at a time only to emerge from a seemingly unconnected pool a furlong or so further on, presumably having wound her way between the two through some watery, peat-walled tunnel beneath the bog’s surface. This meant,

thankfully, that conversation was kept to a minimum—possibly intentionally on Aldrovanda’s part, reflected Bon Bon. The vain creature couldn’t have liked admitting that anything was capable of scaring her, and perhaps, for once, she suspected that she might come off the worse in a verbal spar.

This did not mean that Aldrovanda was completely silent, however; far from it. She seemed to feel that she had a duty to make at least some biting comments during the journey, but was obviously leery of angering Bon Bon—which meant that, at fairly regular intervals, she would pop up and express snide disapproval of an apparently randomly-chosen subject, after which she waited awkwardly for a moment for a response that didn’t come and then dove back underwater. By the time the first wisps had begun to show their eerie lights in the depths of the darkest, most thickly-clustered stands of willows, Aldrovanda had expressed her general dislike for ponies, the color red, the Sun, stallions, doors, mares, changelings (she didn’t seem to realize that this might be offensive until about thirty minutes later, at which point she suddenly surfaced almost beneath Bon Bon’s hooves and said, “Not that you’re like that. You’re a traitor and a deviant, so much of that doesn’t apply, and to be quite honest the changeling stench is hardly noticeable on you,” and then submerged herself again), all kelpies other than herself, celery, air, all Shee other than herself, dragonflies (“Impossible to catch, and when you do finally get them, they taste absolutely revolting. Five years ago, I had to live off them from a waxing to a new moon. I don’t recommend it”), Queen Xubidu, glass (“So, when you say “never decays,” you don’t actually mean “never decays,” do you? It’s actually “takes a while to decay,” or “doesn’t decay unless soaked in water at midnight on the summer solstice under a new moon,” or something along those lines, yes?”), trains, cities, flint, and doorknobs.

Aldrovanda was in the midst of describing to Bon Bon the many, many aspects of clouds that offended her on a personal level (and Bon Bon was idly tossing around the idea of finding a dry stick, waiting until the kelpie had stopped talking, and then slapping the twig vertically across her closed mouth) when Aldrovanda suddenly came to a halt, her free ear springing to attention and her left ear straining at its moorings. She craned her head, sniffing suspiciously, and then hissed, “We’re being followed.”

Bon Bon, who had been perhaps half a dozen paces ahead, turned and looked back at the kelpie. “Are you sure? I don’t hear anything.”

“Hear? Who said anything about hearing? Can’t you sense—” She stopped abruptly and gave an exasperated snort. “Of course you can’t.” She trotted up to Bon Bon and swatted the blossom of Mage Starswirl’s wort out of the changeling’s mane. “There. Now?”

Bon Bon shivered as the underlying threads of unreality surrounding her, vitiated and starved but still present, reasserted themselves. The shock was much less than she had been expecting; here in the depths of the swamp the flower had hardly any effect at all. Worrying about the pull of Faerie in this surreally real place, it seemed, was like being afraid of drowning in a puddle.

A puddle rippling, she realized, with the thrashings of a creature far too big for it. Bon Bon whipped around, staring back the way they had come. There was another Shee here, disturbing the drifting wisps of lost time as it attempted to hoard them to itself. Bon Bon strained her senses, trying to parse out the nature of their pursuer from the feel—the taste—of the shuddering twitches rippling through the thinly stretched tatters of mislaid time around her. There was a hollow, rattling touch of old, dried blood about it, the texture of deception, all drenched in the taste of stagnant water and decaying leaves. It felt almost like...

Aldrovanda's eyes widened. "I can't stand family reunions. Toodles." There was a splash and a sloshing of floating sphagnum in a nearby mere, and the kelpie was gone. Bon Bon edged back up a weedy slope into the shadows of small cluster of willows, wincing as stray stalks of Mage Starswirl's wort brushed against her skin. A kelpie wasn't quite as bad as a changeling would have been—with any luck, this one would only be looking for Aldrovanda, and with the changelings all massing for the attack on Canterlot it was just possible that the kelpies didn't know her as anything other than "that deviant that Queen Sponge-For-Hooves convinced Xubidu to keep an eye on." Still, she wasn't eager to meet any other Shee. There was a rustling and splashing off somewhere in the gloaming, and the changeling waited, silently peering out through a curtain of willow fronds.

More rustling, more splashing...and clattering? Bon Bon's brow furrowed. That didn't sound like a kelpie; most of them rarely left the water, thus avoiding Aldrovanda's sticky situation. If anything, though, this newcomer sounded like it was even more buried in detritus than Aldrovanda; it approached with an almost musical clicking and clinking, as if it had somehow managed to attach several thousand skipjack beetles to its hide and none of them were happy about it.

The reeds parted, and something very aged stumbled out—a stallion, Bon Bon thought, but considering that she wasn't even sure what kind of beast it was, identifying its gender posed some problems. It was covered in a coat of freshwater clam shells, pointed and disc-shaped snail shells, mussel shells, and the shucked exoskeletons of crayfish and freshwater crabs, some still brown and glossy but most bleached bone white, with a glaze of green algae seeping from their crevices. What little of its wrinkled skin was visible was encrusted in fine pebbles, grit, and the shells of newly hatched snails, and its mane and

tail were thin and ragged, trailing tattered, half-rotten brown strands of waterweed decorated with fragments of eggshells. It tottered on to the patch of sod where Aldrovanda and Bon Bon had been standing a moment before and sniffed at the air, craning its neck and peering into the shadows around it with rheumy eyes. In a croaking, raspy voice (definitely a stallion, thought Bon Bon), it—he—called out, “My name is Manchineel! I am a shellycoat—I know my place. I will not speak ill. Please, is there a kelpie here? Please?” He waited for a moment, and called out again, “I will speak no ill! Please? Please?” The creature half-turned, stumbling as he tried to see in the dim light, and then seemed to catch some scent. He turned around, and stepped towards Bon Bon’s hiding place. “Is there someone there? Are you a kelpie? I know my place. I know it, truly. I am just a shellycoat.”

No sense in trying to hide further. Bon Bon raised a hoof and pushed aside the willow fronds, stepping forward into the reddened dusk light. “I’m a changeling, not a kelpie. What—you said you ‘know your place.’ What do you mean?”

The creature was about to respond when the dark pool nearby hissed, “Don’t make eye contact!” There was a moment of silence, during which Manchineel stared fixedly at the water’s surface and Bon Bon rolled her eyes, and then the pool said, “...Smelt it,” and Aldrovanda’s head broke the surface, ears flattened and mane drifting around her in weedy tangles.

Manchineel immediately spoke up. “Please, my name is Manchineel, I am a shellycoat, but do you know of a kelpie named Pinguicula? She is my—I knew—I wonder, do you know—”

He stuttered to a halt. Aldrovanda stared at him for several long moments, eyes half-lidded. “You knew her?”

“Yes. No! I—it is a kelpie name? I know my place. It is a beautiful kelpie name, and I—I hoped to hear of the life of such a kelpie, if she should exist, with such a beautiful name. Nothing more. Have you ever met with a kelpie with that name?”

Aldrovanda yawned hugely, teeth gleaming. “I’m terribly sorry, but I’ve never been much of one for Trooping. I tend to stay away from the lochs; I’m a bog kelpie. Haven’t talked to one of my *eternal* kin—” she laid a heavy stress on the word, “—in ages.” She hoisted herself lazily up out of the pool, water dripping from the interstices of the pebbles on her hooves and gleaming on the glass in her mane.

The shellycoat stepped back. “But you wear a coat! Not a full one, but a coat! Are you—is it that—I will speak no ill. No ill. But...” He trailed off again under the force of Aldrovanda’s withering glare, and then added, so quietly that it seemed as though he was afraid to hear his own voice, “She was my daughter. You have heard nothing of her?”

The kelpie froze, eyes wide, and then oozed into a predatory slouch, her habitual smirk distorting into a snarl. “Is it that’ what? I’m a kelpie, and you’re a shellycoat, and we are *not* kin, although I am flattered, in a wholly disgusted sort of way, that you would think otherwise. Your perversities notwithstanding, I am immortal—and you too, for that matter, and all Shee, although you deserve eternity even less than my august companion here.” She gestured dismissively in Bon Bon’s direction, apparently too angry to remember that she had been trying not to insult the changeling. She lashed her tail viciously, and brought her fanged face level with Manchineel’s. “Shall I tell you something? I *have* heard of Pinguicula—but marvel of marvels, she was a kelpie when last I heard of her. Moreover, I strongly suspect that she will continue to be a kelpie for all eternity, and has been one ever since her hatching. Not a shellycoat. A kelpie. Forever. Just as you will always be a shellycoat, and always were one.”

“But...my daughter...”

“*You have no—*”

“Aldrovanda!” The kelpie stopped. Bon Bon stepped forward. “I don’t know what this is about, but you’re going way too far. Leave him alone.”

“But he—”

“I don’t care what he did or what he said. I’m adding another condition to you tagging along with me, you understand? You will *not* be abusive to anypony—or anyone, I’m not leaving you that loophole—while you’re with me. Is that clear?”

Aldrovanda blinked. “But Bon Bon, be reasonable. Surely you realize that he was implying—”

“I am being reasonable. Tell him what he wants to know, *politely*, and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Politely?”

“Politely.”

Aldrovanda slid a thin tongue across teeth like knapped arrowheads. “I see. Politely.” She paused. “How, exactly, does one...?”

• • •

It took some doing, but eventually Bon Bon managed to extract something vaguely resembling common decency from Aldrovanda, and after a bit of further pushing and pulling got it aimed and fired off in the general direction of the wrinkled little shellycoat, who had seemed to be at a general loss to understand what was going on ever since Bon Bon had intervened. Even as Aldrovanda was talking, he kept on shooting little uncertain sidelong glances at the changeling, as if she were some strange alien thing whose nature he couldn't quite grasp. He didn't get much opportunity to figure her out; Aldrovanda was uncharacteristically curt in her description of the life and times of the kelpie Pinguicula, and Bon Bon herself was hardly in the mood for delays. Scarcely more than thirty minutes had passed since Aldrovanda had first scented his approach before the shellycoat had paddled away again, apparently satisfied with what Aldrovanda had told him, and Bon Bon had continued her march towards the Canterhorn, followed closely by her “pack kelpie.”

They trudged along through the dusk in silence for some moments, and then Bon Bon said, “So. What in Celestia's name just happened?”

Aldrovanda sniffed. “You interfered most high-hoofedly in what should have been a strictly kelpie-shellycoat affair, for reasons that, frankly, elude me. Honestly, Bon Bon, I'm not entirely sure I approve of this whole ‘altruism’ thing you appear to have picked up among your little ponies. Doesn't strike me as being in very good taste.”

“I'm sure it doesn't. What did he say that was so offensive to you?”

“Offensive to me?” The kelpie raised an eyebrow. “I wasn't offended. Basic decency was offended, and I had no other option but to gallop boldly to its rescue. Any sensible being doesn't come across a slander like that and let it lie. It might take root.”

“A slander like what?”

Aldrovanda came to a stop, and stared at Bon Bon as if she couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. “Why, the implication that any Shee, much less kelpies, might be capable of aging, and presumably, eventually, even being killed by a surfeit of age. It's a common perversity of shellycoats; the race as a whole is completely bonkers, convinced that they're all kelpies who have, er, grown old—if you'll pardon the bluntness of my

phrasing—and Tartarus-bent on pestering any kelpie they come across for details of old family members and suchlike. Occasionally you even get a shellycoat who infiltrates their way into the clan, does away with a kelpie, and then impersonates them, slowly adding on shells and detritus over time to give the masquerade verisimilitude. They're promptly exiled, of course, as soon as they're discovered." She cocked a detritus-covered head, her glass and wood-filled mane clinking slightly, and eyed Bon Bon, who was processing the implications of this and trying not to scream. "I must confess I'm surprised at you not knowing this, Bon Bon. I suppose changelings aren't similarly afflicted?"

"N-no. No shellycoats for us. We do often have problems with ponies infiltrating the hives and claiming to be changelings, but—" Bon Bon came to a halt. Sun and Moon. Sun and—Epona and *Danu!*

She had noticed that her transformations had seemed far more tiring than she remembered from the bad old days, but she had chalked that up to a lack of practice, and nothing more. It had never occurred to her to suppose that her own abilities might have deteriorated in some way. She was one of the Shee, after all, and therefore eternal and unchanging. Any suggestion to the contrary would be, well, blasphemous. Obscene. All Shee knew that they were an exalted order of beings, above and beyond mere mortals, and that those creatures who did creep in, claiming to be family and troop-mates, were simply envious of the high position that the true Shee held. They had, she recalled with a shudder, always been treated as such, at least among the changelings, who had never been kind to the ponies—and occasionally, other creatures—who slunk into the great gatherings, pleading their Unselie nature and claiming that they were changelings whose bones creaked with age and whose ability to transform had faltered and eventually failed altogether. Some had cried for their sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers, even as they were dragged, bound and marked with woad, off to one of the great dolmens. Blasphemers to the very end.

But suppose they were telling the truth? Before she came to Ponyville, she would have rejected the idea with disgust, and after she had settled in with Lyra—well, she hadn't liked to think of the Shee or of their ways. It was a world she no longer wanted to belong to, and any time spent pondering it was, from her point of view, time wasted. Now that she thought on the immortality of the Shee from the perspective of a pony, though...well, there were holes in the Canon of Danu. Gaping holes. Holes easily large enough for an immortal being to tumble through unawares, plunging down in shocked terror towards an unexpected mortality.

Bon Bon had never relished her immortality, and after she had met Lyra it had seemed to her like a positive curse; her plan had been, for some years now, to simply not seek out

another source of love upon Lyra's eventual death, starving herself out of a world bereft of the pony she loved more than life itself. It wouldn't be a pleasant end, but she had been resigned to it. It wasn't the bookends that really mattered, after all, but the stories between them, and together her life and Lyra's had been such a lovely story.

The whole matter bore more thinking on, of course—it seemed unlikely, to say the least, that so many Shee had been misled so completely for so long—but she suspected that, just perhaps, the conclusion to her story might be somewhat different from what she had expected.

The Sun rose above the Sunken Swamp, hanging low in the sky as it sent gleaming shafts of light slashing down from the east to cut the dreams of a slumbering changeling to pieces, rousing her from her slumber.

But no. That was not what happened at all. A sun, one of an uncountable infinitude scattered across the vastnesses of time and space, neither rose, fell, nor hung in the sky. Far above it a world spun, bound together by gravity, charge, and the strange terrible contortions of spacetime that flicker within the smallest fragments of existence. Counterpoised ripples of electricity and magnetism—"light," to the inhabitants of the little world—propagated out from the star to refract, diffract, reflect, and be absorbed by the stuff of the planet's surface. Some—all—of these waves splashed against the closed eyelids of a sleeping creature, and vast universes of probability were forever sundered from one another as a tiny fraction of them resonated with certain minute fragments of matter within the sleeper's eyes, triggering a cascade of neurochemicals which—

But, again, no. The star, the spinning planet, and the coiling waves of light were all true and correct; this swamp, into which reality pooled like water flowing into a vast stone basin, would not tolerate such foolishnesses as rising suns or shafts of light. The interloping changeling who slept beneath one of countless shrub-like willows growing in that strangely real place, however, was not of the swamp. When she had entered it she had carried a faint but persistent aura of Faerie with her, and it persisted still, woven through her bones and flowing swift as summer lightning in her veins. As soon as the ripples of electricity and magnetism struck her eyes the waves became simple sunbeams, wrenched loose from the cosmic verities of twisted time and oscillating possibilities—and in the same instant, the sleeping Shee was made minutely more mundane, the magic within her diminishing as it spent itself against the impinging light. For every action...

Bon Bon's eyes flickered open, and after scratching absently with her hind leg at the bits of moss and twigs clinging to her flanks, she rose to her hooves, balancing unsteadily on love-starved limbs. She turned and craned her neck back, gazing up at the stone colossus that was the Canterhorn. This close to its base it dominated the skyline, its steep flanks arcing out to each side and ice-capped peak soaring towards the zenith. It was an intimidating sight. Bon Bon sighed; it was a shame that following the train lines was no longer a practical option, as that would have been an easier voyage than the one that now confronted her. By the time Aldrovanda had caught up with her yesterday, though, she had made such good progress it had seemed that retracing her steps would have been a waste of time—and if she had been wrong, well, it was too late to bemoan the fact now. The changeling trotted down to a nearby pool, took a few gulps of water dank with the

taste of rotting leaves, and after waiting for the surface to clear, peered into the water's depths trying to spot Aldrovanda.

Yes, there she was, as still as a toad in midwinter and half buried in the muck at the bottom of the pool. Bon Bon glanced around, spotted a suitably hefty rock, and bucked it into the weed-choked mere. There was a satisfying "GalOONK," a sloshing and a shower of water, and after a short interval a bleary-eyed kelpie emerged. Aldrovanda directed an extremely peeved stare at Bon Bon, and with an air of wounded dignity said, "Pffftchffl."

The changeling rolled her eyes. "Noted. Now, cough the water out of your lungs, grab a fish or frog if you're hungry, and let's get going. We've got a swamp to cross and a mountain to climb." She turned, tried to ignore the hunger biting at her own bones, and forced her aching legs into motion. It was going to be a long day.

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Small fragments of light skittered through the tree-filled swamp, cast down from the waving leaves above and glowing rust-red as they sank into the leaf-stained water. Overhead leafy canopies spread to stifle the wind and subdue the Sun, while beneath solitary ripples drifted through the dark waters, gliding lazily along on their silent business. Egrets lived here, stalking through the shallows and spearing at sticklebacks and frogs, while cowbirds and warblers dove and leapt through the gaps between the branches and swamp crayfish rested beneath the tattered rims of decaying leaves. Of Shee, though, there was not a sign; no golden-eyed, silver-tongued púcas, no bloody redmanes, no will-o'-the-wisps—not even the smallest alp-luachra, curled salamander-like below the water and lying in wait to crawl down the throats of drowsy travelers. Even the more typical beasts were missing: none of the birds flittering through the trees overhead showed the steely flash of Stymphalian feathers, the cooing of bog parasprites was conspicuous by its absence, and Bon Bon would have been willing to bet that there wasn't a single hydra, even a juvenile, for miles around.

For her part, Bon Bon didn't mind so much; it was strange, yes, and buried deep in the back of her mind there was a little logical voice twitching anxiously and asking pointed questions about whether it might not be a good idea to be just a tad worried by this eldritch banality, but mostly she just felt a great, overwhelming relief. She felt...safe here. It reminded her, in many ways, of the feel of Ponyville or Canterlot, where all that was Unseelie and fey lay buried beneath cobbles, plaster, and the happy chatter of ponies going about their good, simple little lives—except that here the threads of Faerie weren't buried, they just didn't exist. It felt as though a great burden that had been pressing against her mind all her life had suddenly been drawn away, and despite her fear for

Lyra, she found herself feeling almost cheerful. It was a nice swamp, she thought, as she gingerly gnawed at a leech that had attached itself to one of her fetlocks, trying to tug it off. It was, perhaps, a little too full of horrible sharp-toothed things with bad attitudes—leeches, snakes, midges, Aldrovanda, ticks—but still, all in all a very nice swamp. She approved of it.

Horrible sharp-toothed thing #4, on the other hoof, was not taking things quite so well. As they traveled deeper into the swamp Aldrovanda had become less talkative, taking to crawling through the water close by Bon Bon's side with only her head held above the surface and her gaze darting suspiciously left and right. Every so often she would hear something, or think that she had heard something, and then there would be a small explosion of pond scum and distressed frogs as the kelpie tried to dive beneath the surface of the hock-deep water, thrashing frantically against the shallow swamp bed. It was, Bon Bon had to admit to herself, more than a little pathetic—in the kinder, more sympathetic sense of the word.

Which wasn't to say she was suddenly awash with feelings of goodwill and sympathy towards the creature. After being doused in greenish ooze for the fifth time in an hour, the changeling snapped, "Oh, for goodness' sake, Aldrovanda, there's nothing out there."

Aldrovanda hissed. "I know, smelt you! That's it. That's exactly it. There's nothing there! How can you *stand* it?"

Bon Bon shook herself, ridding her coat of some of the larger globs of ooze, and waded on in the direction of the distant Canterhorn, visible above the trees as a jagged pillar of shadow blotting out the afternoon Sun. "Honestly? I sort of like it."

"You like it," repeated Aldrovanda in a flat, incredulous voice. "You *like* it?" She cantered splashily after Bon Bon, her voice soaring up several registers to dance uncertainly between "shrill" and "hysterical." "Of *course* you like it! Really, I don't see why I should even be surprised. It's nothing so frightful, after all, just the *total absence of Faerie.*"

Bon Bon shrugged. "It's not that bad. And besides, my voice hasn't been this steady in years; normally it hops all over the place, but here there's not enough background magic to shift my form. It makes for a nice change."

"Oh, well. That makes it all better then, doesn't it? Who cares if we're flopping out here like a fish in the Sintered Lands, as long as your smelted voice is steady! Let's just *embrace* this obscene openness, shall we? 'Tra la,' I seem to hear you say, 'tra la la and a few more "tra la"s for flavor. I'm a traitor to my race and the Unseelie Court itself, a filly

fond of fillies, a changeling who plays with her food in the very *vilest* sense of the phrase, a Shee who not only tolerates but *encourages* the blasphemous fever-dreams of a shellycoat—but what can I do that’s *really* perverse? What further infamies can I indulge in?”

“Aldrovanda...”

“And then, and then!” The kelpie’s voice had completely abandoned the merely shrill at this point, and was nearing “nervous breakdown.” “Not content with wallowing in your own unnatural tastes, you insist on dragging along a sane creature, a creature who once could look forward to days of happily picking her fangs with her last meal’s bones at the bottom of a bog, or lounging on a mossy boulder in the middle of lovely downpour, or sneaking up on frogs and jumping on them to feel them squish so delightfully around her hooves—happy, innocent creature, she! *Little did she suspect!*”

“Aldrovanda.”

“Little did she suspect, I say! Oh, Fortune, like the moon you are variable, always waxing and—”

“Aldrovanda!”

“—waning,” finished the kelpie. “And you’re rude, to boot. I’m not one to boast, but that was shaping up to be a truly phenomenal fit. What new outrage, pray tell, is the World’s Least Unselie Shee planning to perpetrate now?”

Bon Bon waded cautiously over into the shadow of a low-lying branch, trying futilely to disturb the water’s surface as little as possible. “No new outrage at all. I just thought you might want to know that there’s something strange coming. I can smell it. Try not to make any—” There was a tremendous splash as Aldrovanda and an Aldrovanda-shaped volume of water had a short but violent argument over the ownership of a patch of muck below the swamp’s surface, which Aldrovanda won decisively. “—noise.”

White-green froth rocked back and forth on the disturbed water, and wavelets spread out in great concentric circles into the shadowed swamp beyond. A bittern boomed nervously somewhere overhead, and then fell silent. The wind shifted direction, and the smell Bon Bon had detected—a bizarre scent, faint but extraordinarily complex and many-layered—began to fade as it was carried away again. The disturbed water smoothed, the ripples quieted themselves, and a tree frog clinging precariously to a low-hanging leaf began chirping. Bon Bon allowed her tensed muscles to relax fractionally.

There were many creatures she wasn't very familiar with in this swamp, and it wasn't so far-fetched that an otherwise unremarkable creature might possess a completely new scent. Perhaps she was being overcautious...

Splunk. Something bulky and heavy had entered the water, somewhere out there in the gloom. Too big to be a frog. It— *Splosh. Gloonk. Splunk.* It was wading through the water towards them. To judge from the sounds, it was tall enough that it was completely clearing the water's surface with each step.

Gloonk. Splosh.

Widening rings of ripples glided into view, curving around Aldrovanda's submerged body and breaking against Bon Bon's hocks as they flowed smoothly forward.

Splunk.

Bon Bon twitched involuntarily, head snapping up towards the sky as the light filtering down from above abruptly shifted. The shadows lengthened around her, streaming out towards the source of the sounds as if the Sun had suddenly come unstuck from the sky and was slipping back down to the horizon. With a gentle hiss mist began rising from the water around the frightened changeling, eddying up in diaphanous dunes and arabesques that hovered in the damp air before pouring in a silent flood along the same path as the light. The tree shadows angled themselves oddly, twisting like midnight-black spotlights so that instead of lying parallel they all bent towards the approaching thing, obscuring its shape in a many-angled shroud of darkness.

And all this without the slightest prickling of magic or the faintest hint of the green, writhing Faerie scent.

Splosh. Splunk.

Bon Bon had just concluded that trying to escape would be suicide, and was about to start galloping nonetheless—it was a miracle that Aldrovanda was staying as still as she was, although possibly the kelpie had had a heart attack—when the shadowed, swaying immensity came to a halt perhaps five yards from the cowering Shee. Bon Bon risked peering around her tree trunk at the towering thing, but without much result; it was completely obscured in the mists and shadows, with the possible exception of a crowning mass of shadows and light that might have been branches, or maybe antlers. A small wave surged past her as the thing lowered itself down, reclining or sitting in the shallow water.

“An’ whit,” spoke a resonant, throaty, crackling voice from the depths of the mist, “nicht a leanan sídhe and a fuath be thinkin’, tae have wandered so far oot o’ reach of Tír na nÓg?”

Bon Bon didn’t respond, and the shadowed beast gave a chuckle like the sound of pebbles and rocks tumbling down a scree slope just before an avalanche. “Swallow the fear that clings in yer throat. I hae no especial love for the Aes Sídhe, but neither hae I hatred for them. I pity them only, an’ wish them a happier fate than the one that is their doom. Ye are no’ seen by cruel een.”

Bon Bon took a hesitant step from behind her hiding place. She felt a slight shift in the water to her left, which might have meant that Aldrovanda had moved as well. If so, though, the kelpie evidently rethought her first impulse, and remained below the surface. Not that Bon Bon blamed her, for once. The changeling mare took a deep breath, and waded out into full view, fearful face upturned towards the veiled speaker. Yes, it definitely had some branching structure atop its head—horns, it looked like now, only far more horns than any normal creature should possess. She couldn’t see them clearly, but it looked as if none of them matched, each one coming from a different animal. For a moment, before the mists coiling around its body—his body, considering the antlers—thickened again, she thought she had even seen a monstrous antenna, twitching in horrific immensity.

“What—what are you?”

The shadows shifted and the great horns tilted, as if a huge head was slowly being shaken side to side. “Nay, that is no’ how the game is played. Thou hast no’ yet answered my question, wee leanan sídhe. Things must no’ be left undone.”

“Ah.” What *was* she doing here? The kelpie in the swamp, the Court’s attack on Canterlot, her futile warning, Lyra, the interrupted train ride, the trek across the swamp...how to tell all that? “I’m, uh, a changeling actually, and she’s a kelpie. I’m trying to get to Canterlot on hoof. The clan of the changelings is attacking it, and a—a pony friend of mine is in danger there. I need to—”

Mist swirled. “Canterlot? Poor wee beastie, that is only a name, and names change. Thou art a changeling now, but once thy kind were leanan sídhe. See! Changes, always changes. Dinnae tell me the names; tell me truths.”

Right, then. “Um. Okay, I’m trying to get to—to the city on the side of that mountain there, the tallest one. The pony I mentioned is up there, in great danger, and I’m the only one who can help her. So, well, I had to come through here.”

“And thy friend, the fuath—or kelpie, as thou’dst ken her? Whit is her reason for strugglin’ so far?”

“Acquaintance,” corrected Bon Bon automatically. “She’s...tagging along, for various reasons.”

“A cagey answer, but mare guid than some micht hae bin.” The thing within the shadows shifted down in what might have been a bow. For a moment Bon Bon caught a glimpse of a huge lanky arm held in front of the beast, patches of hair of varying lengths hanging off it and interrupted by shadowed scales, short fur and glistening froglike skin, and then the mists returned. It vaguely reminded her of something she had once seen, but she wasn’t sure what. An old painting, maybe? A carving? “An’ now I shall answer thy own question, though it is an odd one, for I am as I am. Thou mayst already ken of my kind, though, as the urisks?”

Bon Bon stared blankly. The cluster of shadows made a nodding motion. “The name isnae kent tae thee, then—well, an’ it is an auld name, at that. I’m feart I hae no newer ones. Perhaps another, aulder name; when the Sun was a we’an an’ the Moon’s head was no’ yet dizzied wi’ envy, I walked abroad mare often, an’ some, then, kent me as the Teus. This name, perhaps...? But I see it too is strange tae thee. Ah, weel.” He sighed. “Then unless thou kenst the name Bugul Noz, there are mickle kindly ways that I may answer thy question.”

“I’ve never heard your name before, Bugul Noz—” Should there have been an “O” in front of the name? “O Bugul Noz?” Maybe “Great Bugul Noz” would be more appropriate. Somehow the name all by itself seemed inadequate. “—but couldn’t you just, I don’t know, describe what you are?”

The creature repositioned himself slightly, sending another cluster of wavelets rippling out from his resting place in the water. “Though it is no’ of muckle concern tae me, Bugul Noz is no’ my name. I am *the* Bugul Noz, the Night Shepherd as ye might say—and that is no’ a bad way to describe the manner of being whit I am, although I will not say that it is a guid way, either. But for me to tell thee well and truly would take twelve lives of your kind, I think, and perhaps twelve mare. Ye would hae long since died of auld age afore I finished.”

“I’m one of the Shee, actually, so I’m immortal.” Bon Bon paused. “At least, I think so. Thought so.”

“Ah?” The Bugul Noz leaned forward, and for a moment the changeling thought she saw the faint shine of amber eyes within the mists, glimmering with antiquity. She had seen eyes like that before; she knew she had. They reminded her of something that she had tried hard to forget...

The beast chuckled. “If it be so, then the world has changed in great and peculiar ways. The Aes Sídhe werenae immortal when last I kent them. Indeed, there were scarcely any other beasties more mortal than they.” He chortled to himself again, a rolling, throaty sound, and Bon Bon finally remembered where she had heard a voice like that before—and where she had seen a similar patchwork body, and scented that convoluted, confused scent. A year ago, during the second most horrible day of her life, a God had set itself loose in Equestria. It had smelled like this, and its eyes had had that same amber gleam. No. Sun and Moon, *no*. She took a step back, muscles tensed for flight—but what was the point of running? You couldn’t run from a force of nature. Eyes riveted on the shadow looming above her, she stammered out, “I—I *do* know what you are. Or close enough. You’re a draconequus.” She swallowed. “You’re Chaos.”

The shadow shifted, antlers and horns creaking and scraping against one another like branches in a stiff breeze. “Chaos? Thou rank’st me too high, I am feart. I know Chaos, and it and I are guid, auld friends, but—”

“Liar.”

Both the Bugul Noz and Bon Bon started. Aldrovanda had surfaced, and was staring up at the cloaked chimera, her upper lip curled up in a slight snarl. The draconequus turned to her, the mist thickening around its body. “Whit falsehuid have I told?”

Aldrovanda’s cowardice did not appear to have quite caught up with her indignation yet. She stepped forward, glass-filled mane clinking. “That bit about us not being immortal. Eternity is our birthright, creature, and whoever the slip-brained, bell-addled shellycoat of a Shee was who hinted to you otherwise, I sincerely hope that they blundered into a foundry or mistook a lump of bog iron for a turtle and only realized their mistake when it was halfway down their throat. It *was* a shellycoat, I suppose? Probably male; spreading heresy outside the clan seems like the sort of particularly idiotic thing a male would do.” She sniffed. “Testosterone poisoning, you know. No doubt he thought he was being impressive.”

The Bugul Noz considered this for a bit. “T’is unseemly, perhaps, for me tae follow a question wi’ anither question—but perhaps ye’ll forgive me it. Ah’m puzzled, ye see. Whitever thou imagine’st me tae be is clearly very frightful tae thee, leanan sídhe—yet thou, fuath, hae jist told me off as if I were a fool wee bairn, caught thoughtlessly toying wi’ matters far mare muckle than myself. It is vexing tae me, this inconsistency. Please, explain. Whit dae ye think I am?”

Pain, thought Bon Bon. Loss. Trickery. Sadism. Evil. “I’ve encountered a draconequus before. He was called Discord; he broke out of some kind of stone prison less than a year ago, and he...” Her voice trailed off.

How could she possibly describe it? She had been at Sugarcube Corner talking with Mr. Cake at the time—demand had been increasing for her candy flowers and Ottomare Delight, and the Cakes had been interested in buying a larger weekly supply from her—when He had come. The first warning had been a distant cascading series of cracks and booms, and when Bon Bon dashed outside she had seen the great airborne pegasus city, Cloudsdale, collapsing in ruin while the long, lithe, chimerical form of Discord writhed down out of the sky towards Ponyville.

She had been afraid—terrified, in fact—but she could have borne that. For that one horrible day, though, before the draconequus had been miraculously sealed away again, she thought that she had lost Lyra. It wasn’t that her marefriend was physically hurt. Far from it, in fact. When Bon Bon had finally arrived back at their home (which was, at the time, upside-down and floating fifty feet up in the air. Bon Bon had transformed into a pegasus, figuring that she could always explain the wings as just another manifestation of Discord’s chaotic influence), she had found Lyra in their basement, methodically bashing the fing-er to pieces with a wrench. She had begged Lyra to come with her, escape, get away—but the spring-green unicorn had drawn back from her, a look of disgust on her face, and had hissed, “Ew, gay. Get away from me, fillyfooler.” Discord hadn’t just upended reality; he had twisted and broken ponies’ minds, as well, ripping the world to pieces and dancing, laughing, on the fragments.

And now, here was another draconequus. He might even be Discord, escaped from his prison and back for more sadistic fun—the demonic being had been a shapeshifter, after all—but this seemed like an awfully long build-up for the punchline. Bon Bon had trouble believing that the mad God from last summer could ever be this patient. She sighed, and finished, “Discord hurt a lot of ponies. He tortured the world.”

“I was napping that week, so I didn’t really notice,” piped up Aldrovanda. “But the water in my bog tasted like rotting milk for months afterwards, so on reflection I have to concur with the changeling. Discord definitely lacked class.”

The Bugul Noz was still for a long moment, considering. Then, gently and with not the faintest hint of magic, the shadows began to slide away from his body and back into their appropriate paths while the mists fell away, drifting down in a spreading pool around the draconequus.

Aldrovanda hissed, sliding back under the water’s surface, and Bon Bon took a few splashing steps back. The being that stood before them was similar to Discord in many ways, his body long and serpentine and patched together from a hodgepodge of different creatures—but he was also, quite clearly, immeasurably older than his wild relative. Where Discord had had only two mismatched horns, the Bugul Noz had many, branching up from his heavysset head like an unruly thicket and protruding in odd patches from his shaggy neck. His skin was a patchwork of many creatures’ hides, mostly four-legged—but there were a few odd patches from boneless beasts, soft and shimmering with shifting colors or jointed like a locust’s thorax. Three wings arched above his back, two of which appeared to be pieced together from the wings or membranes of many creatures—bats, birds, insects, flying squirrels, dragons—and the third of which Bon Bon could have sworn was actually a whale’s fin. His arms and legs were chimerical, his tail was a zoological kaleidoscope, and his head was a snaggletoothed abomination, angular and bulging in all the wrong places. Only his eyes were not quite so terrible to look at: they were similar to Discord’s, certainly, but where the spirit of chaos’ eyes had flared madly, the Bugul Noz’s were calm and quiet, like amber glowing with the warmth of ancient sunlight.

The great creature spread his arms, mismatched claws open and palms turned towards the two Shee. “A frightful beast, am I no’? I prefer tae stay hidden; I am, I think, no’ quite so unnerving when veiled. But, as ye say ye hae already seen anither lik’ me, perhaps the shock o’ my own shape will no’ be so stoatin’. The Wild One is called ‘Discord,’ now? I kent him as Tarakhe, but from thy description it could no’ be any being but he.” He sighed. “My poor nephew! Tae hae been given, so kindly, a second chance—an’ then tae hae wasted it so!”

“Your *nephew*?”

“In a manner of spikkin’. That is tae say, we are kin o’ a sort, I am senior an’ he wis junior, an’ he is very far from bein’ my son. So aye, ‘nephew’ is perhaps the best word that could be chosen, even if it is no’ quite accurate.”

Bon Bon paused a moment, thinking, before she responded. This creature seemed to be honestly benign, and even friendly. If he had powers anything like Discord's, and could be persuaded to use them—the images of Chrysalis and the changelings being cast out, Equestria being saved, and Lyra returning to her, safe and whole, flickered through her mind. She couldn't waste this opportunity. "So, uh, a little while ago you said that you pitied the, er, Ais Sheeah, I think you called us. You aren't like Discord, then? You really wouldn't hurt us?"

"I hae nae wish tae."

Not quite as positive as she would have liked, but definitely not bad, either. "Would you be willing, maybe, to help me, then?"

The Bugul Noz inclined his head. "How's that?"

"Well, if you have powers anything like Discord's, you could save my friend. Hay, you could stop the invasion; you could save everypony, even with a tenth of Discord's power. Would you? I mean, I guess maybe you haven't always noticed when things have gone wrong in Equestria before, and maybe that's why you never helped in the past, but...but..." She trailed off. No. It wasn't a real hope. A power on the scale of Discord's or Celestia's didn't just tuck itself away in the shadows if it could do otherwise. The changeling raised her head to meet the Bugul Noz's gaze, and her shoulders slumped as she saw the pitying, almost apologetic look in his face. "That's a 'no,' then."

"Aye, t'is. Thou hast miscast me, I'm afraid, wee leanan sídhe; I am no' cruel, but my care is for aulder and deeper things than any brief, mortal beastie. I will no' so upset matters for such a slight cause." Bon Bon shot a sidelong glance at Aldrovanda, who was simmering again at the mention of the word "mortal." The Bugul Noz, who did not appear to have noticed, continued speaking. "I will say, though, that could I help thee, I believe I would. I hae nae especial fondness for poor Tarakhe's children, but unless I miss my mark thou art a wee bit unusual—in the best ways."

"Children?" Bon Bon winced as Aldrovanda erupted from the greenish water, free ear flattened back against her head in rage and rock-filled tail slashing back and forth through the air like a cat 'o nine tails. She splashed forward, glaring furiously up at the hulking draconequus. "*Children!?* We are *nothing's* children, you glorified taxidermy experiment, and certainly not that pathetic newcomer Discord's. Now, don't misunderstand me; I'm very favorably impressed by your extraordinary sensitivity in telling my good frie—my traveling compa—my frenemy, here, that you wouldn't help her save her mislaid *cara sposa*, and then soothing her in her disappointment by

explaining in *insulting* detail exactly why you wouldn't help her. Class act there, really. I'd take my hat off to you if my hat wasn't (A.) a strange bit of door-related pony gramarye and (B.) temporarily stuck fast to my head. But your *impeccable* manners notwithstanding, the mere insinuation that not only might the Eternal Shee have an end, but that our kind might have had a beginning, is such a *vile* suggestion—”

“You do look kind of like a shellycoat, Aldrovanda,” said Bon Bon desperately. She had to distract the wretched creature and stop her from insulting the Bugul Noz. Please Celestia, please oh please oh please, let her stop. Even if he wasn't disposed to help her, she did not need a creature as powerful as Discord getting angry with them. That could end very, very badly.

Aldrovanda made a noise like a toad that had been stepped on, and whipped around to face Bon Bon. The changeling shrugged. “I'm just saying.”

The kelpie made more squished-toad noises, and then spluttered, “Are you actually suggesting that—even you must—*surely* you have some limits—we are the Shee!”

To Bon Bon's desperate relief, the Bugul Noz did not appear to have begun smiting either of them. Good. She liked non-smiting Gods. Now, if she could just keep him that way. “I know, Aldrovanda, ‘we are the Shee.’ But maybe the Shee aren't what we thought they were. Look at yourself. You *do* look like a shellycoat now; there's hardly a patch of your coat that doesn't have something glued to it. And what about the changelings? We have our ‘imposters,’ ponies who occasionally try to sneak into the hives and claim that they're changelings who lost the ability to transform. What if they were telling the truth? And then there are the púcas and their grimalkins, and the redmanes and their—”

“Stop! Just stop! I'm immortal. *I'm immortal*. I am not going to die!” The kelpie's hooves were shaking, sending little ripples spreading in rings around her, although Bon Bon couldn't tell whether it was from anger or fear. “It can't be so. It just can't. It's not *right*. This is just heresy, you heretical—heresy-saying—heretic. I've held back, you know; never really told you what I thought of you. Just you wait, though. *Just you wait*. You think I'm snarky now? You think I'm insulting? You'll see. Oh, you'll see.”

She stared iron daggers at Bon Bon, panting heavily. Bon Bon returned the favor. The Bugul Noz, who had been watching this exchange with an air of polite detachment, remarked, “A gapit mouth often catches a closed fist.”

The kelpie whipped her head around, glaring back up at him. “Ooh, are we playing ‘insults from the Pre-Classical era’ now? How charming! Let me try. ‘Thy mother is a donkey and thy father was redolent of—’”

Bon Bon splashed forward, cutting her off. Enough was enough. “Aldrovanda, a God just told you to shut up. Further sass is probably not a good idea.”

“But Mendax, he said—you said—ah...” Bon Bon could almost hear the sound of several tons of latent cowardice smashing into the kelpie’s indignation. It sounded like “splat,” or possibly “squish.” Aldrovanda stepped back from the draconequus, the snarl slowly disappearing from her face and her eyes widening. “Right. Ah. Good point, actually.” She shot a venomous glance at Bon Bon, hissed, “*We’re* not finished, though,” and sank under the water’s surface.

Neither Bon Bon nor the Bugul Noz said anything for some moments. Gnats hummed around them, a cowbird called somewhere in the distance, and Bon Bon felt what she was reasonably sure was another leech attach itself to her left hind fetlock. Finally, she chanced a glance up at the Bugul Noz. He was gazing down at her, warm eyes half lidded as he stroked his goat-like beard with a chimerical claw. At length, he spoke. “Ah’m sorry for thee; so very sorry. Indeed, for a’ o’ ye. Tarakhe did indeed mak the Aes Sídhé, during his first mad attempt to tak the cosmos for his ane, as a thoughtless joke. Ye were, Ah’m afraid, nothing mare than that; he made ye so that he could laugh at ye. He found it funny tae mak the maist common metal in the world atterly an’ poisonous tae ye, an’ tae gie ye reason tae be feart o’ randomly chosen plants, craiturs, an’ objects. A brow joke!” The Bugul Noz’s voice was uncharacteristically bitter. “My poor, stupit nephew. He thocht that, merely because he could warp reality as he chose, it wouldnae fight back. Reality, wee leanan sídhé, doesnae like bein’ warped.”

The draconequus rose ponderously up from his lounging position, swamp water cascading from his shaggy flanks and duckweed clinging to his scales. He uncoiled his serpentine neck and lifted his head towards the swamp canopy, gazing up at the bulk of the Canterhorn through the whispering leaves, and then he looked down at Bon Bon once more. “Aye, it resented a’ that my nephew did. T’is for that reason that it loathes the Aes Sídhé; to it they are a horror an’ an abomination, an’ as long as they exist reality will strive tae blot them oot o’ being. They kent their danger, once on a time. That is whit ‘Unseelie’ means, thou kenst: ‘Unlucky.’ The Seelie Court ne’er attempted tae hide an’ it withered awa’ within a few hunnert years, while the Unseelie Court has only survived by hoarding fragments o’ lost time, piecing them taege’er tae mak their sheltered realm o’ Tír na nÓg an’ venturing oot from it only rarely.” His strange face creased in a smile.

“Although I ken that thou art something of an exception tae the rule. Come—Mendax, I believe thy friend said?”

“I prefer Bon Bon, actually.”

The draconequus nodded. “Bon Bon it is. Come, then, Bon Bon, an’ I will help thee in whit fashion I may.” He raised an immense hoof/claw/paw and stepped forward. Bon Bon hesitated a moment and then waded after him. Behind her, she heard the splashing sound of Aldrovanda, slithering just beneath the water’s surface after them. She ignored it.

Once Bon Bon had drawn level with him, the Bugul Noz continued, “I hae a’ o’ my nephew’s powers, aye—but I, unlike him, hae chosen tae mak a friend o’ existence. I use my strength no’ tae wrap myself in unreality, but tae diminish it, forcing it awa’ from masel’ an’ squelching it.” He extended an arm tipped with an appendage that was half crab claw and half tentacle, and pushed aside a log blocking Bon Bon’s path. “That surprised the cosmos. It expected me tae drag it tae an’ fro an’ force it tae dae my biddin’, an’ when I didnae—well, I think it became rather fond o’ me. It is kind tae me in its strange, unthinking, emotional way, thou kenst. I dinnae like tae be seen by mortals, as they tend tae be feart by my appearance—an’ so, when I come within sight o’ them, the cosmos itself veils me from their een. I didnae will the mist an’ shadows intae being, wee Bon Bon, when we first met; I merely preferred no’ tae be seen, an’ the cosmos honored my preference.”

Bon Bon raised an eyebrow. “Honestly, I think you were a bit more frightening as an unidentifiable reality warping shadow-monster.”

“Weel, I didnae say that reality quite understands mortal minds. It only ‘understood,’ as much as it is capable o’ understandin’ anything, that I wished no’ tae be seen.” He reared up on his hind legs, squinting at the Canterhorn to get his bearings, and then dropped down to all fours and continued walking. “I hae grown fond o’ the cosmos in turn—great whirlin’ glory that it is!—an’ much as I pity thee, weel...” The Bugul Noz paused, choosing his words. “This pony that thou seek’st tae rescue, there atop the mountain. Thou art fond o’ her, aye? Weel, suppose that a stranger marched up tae thee, an’ begged thy help, for he was in great distress. ‘O’ course,’ thou tellst him. ‘I shall help in ony wa’ that I can.’ ‘Weel then,’ he says, pointin’ tae thy friend, ‘tae help me thou must tak a great stick, an’ soundly beat that pony wi’ it. Only then will I be happy.’ Thou wouldst nae dae it. An’ just so, I will no’ twist reality’s arm tae save thee, a new acquaintance who will be so much dust on the wind a mere century from now. I couldnae be so callous. I love an’ respect the cosmos too muckle.”

Bon Bon digested this. “You wouldn’t intervene even to save the happiness of thousands of ponies? This invasion won’t be a clean business. Queen Chrysalis is cruel, and she’s already snuck her way into the confidence of Celestia and Luna.” She paused. “Er, they’re the two alicorns who control the Sun and—”

The Bugul Noz raised a great paw, chuckling. “Nay, dinnae describe them tae me; I remember them weel, my great-nieces! Clever, bonny lasses, the both o’ them.” His smile faded. “I wish them weel, but no, even for them I wouldnae intervene. Nor would I need tae! They hae a power o’ their ane, my wee changeling, an’ it is kin tae mine. If they wished, either one could do a’ that Tarakhe did an’ more, but they are both canny tae the risks, as my nephew wasnae. Celestia, especially; it has been mony an age since last I met her, but as she still reigns despite exerting her power on the Sun itself, earning the cosmos’ ill-favor morn an’ nicht for thousands o’ years—weel! We hae different views on mony points, but I hae naught but respect for her. A canny, eident lass she is, always ettlin’ at some scheme or t’other. Only half o’ them e’er work oot—but then, a’ she needs is for one tae work.” He came to a halt, sending a small wave surging forward into the tree-shadowed gloom, and after gingerly waving a chimerical claw through the space in front of him and sniffing once or twice, he smiled. “But I indulge masel’ in recollections which are, nae doot, o’ little interest tae thee. Enough o’ that. See! We have arrived!”

Bon Bon glanced around. The patch of water they were standing in didn’t seem terribly remarkable, aside from being, perhaps, a bit colder than the flooded forest through which they had just walked. She looked up at the Bugul Noz. “I, uh, don’t quite understand...”

“Do thee no’? But o’ course, I am forgetting; thou art a wee sma’ beastie, an’ dinnae cover quite so much ground as masel’. Step forward a few paces, an’ thou shouldst see—in a manner o’ speaking.” Bon Bon waded forward through the water, ripples spreading out before her and tiny frogs leaping into the water as she drew near them. Nothing else seemed to happen. She turned and looked back at the Bugul Noz, but he merely motioned her forward, so after a moment of hesitancy she took another step—

—the light dimmed and faded away to blackness, the green moldering taste in the air vanished, the tree frogs and woodpeckers fell into silence, in the fraction of a second before they were completely blotted out of sight the tree trunks morphed into crystalline columns and mounds of rubble—

—and her hoof came down with a light clinking on a smooth stone surface, empty of the smell of life and slightly damp to the touch. She inhaled sharply and, very slowly, lifted her hoof up and took a step back. There was a flood of light, and the swamp surged back

into being. She splashed a few more paces back, just for good measure, and looked up at the Bugul Noz, who was regarding her with an amused look on his face.

“I believe I would have preferred,” Bon Bon said, her voice a controlled monotone, “to have been warned about that beforehoof. What *was* that?”

The tatterdemalion beast chuckled. “Forgive me; I was curious tae see how thou wouldst react. If I may say so, thou showedst great sense an’ composure.”

“Thanks. Again, though, what the hay was that?”

“A convenience, shall we say. A slight folding in space, so that the solid rock o’ my menhir an’ the watters o’ my swamp intersect wi’oot intersecting, an’ bring us quickly an’ easily intae the caves beneath my great-niece’s city. I dinnae spend a’ my time amongst the trees an’ watters here, thou kenst, though I love them dearly. Every few centuries I feel the urge tae wander, an’ these sorts o’ folds allow me tae do so easily. It is a great kindness o’ the cosmos, I have always felt, that it grants me these shortcuts, an’ while it may no’ approve o’ yer kind, it evidently willnae bar thee from using one o’ my paths—just this once. Thy friend is in danger from the clan o’ the leanan sídhe, is she no’? I seem tae recall that that clan favored oubliettes as a means o’ vengeance, an’ if it is still so—well, thou willst find her beneath the Earth, no’ on its surface.”

Bon Bon had waded up to the boundary again, and was now stepping back and forward across the boundary, trying to find the precise point at which cave merged with swamp. Without looking at the Bugul Noz, she muttered, “Yes, that’s true enough.” She stepped back from the threshold. “But there is a chance she might still be in Canterlot. Not much of one, but a chance, and I don’t want to risk guessing wrong. Aldrovanda!”

A matted mane and two squinting eyes popped up from the water’s surface. “It’s a lie. It can’t be true. I will live forever. What do you want?”

Bon Bon waded over to Aldrovanda, and drew a poker and a length of rope out of the saddlebag attached to her back. “I’m promoting you from pack kelpie to messenger kelpie. I’m going to go into the caves under the Canterhorn to try to find Lyra, and I want you to go to Canterlot. There, you are to find Princess Luna. She’s a dark blue alicorn, wears black regalia, and her mane is like the night sky.”

“How poetic,” sneered the kelpie.

“No, it literally looks exactly like the night sky. You’ll see what I mean when you find her. Anyway, find her and tell her that the spirit that possessed Twinkleshine—yes, I know,

Twinkleshine is a very funny name, moving on—is in the caverns underneath Canterlot, trying to find a pale green unicorn mare named Lyra, and that she sent you. Tell her, also, that the pink alicorn with the crystal heart cutie mark—Oh for Celestia’s sake, I didn’t come up with the term “cutie mark,” stop snickering—is the queen of the changelings, Chrysalis, and that she is not to be trusted. Finally, beg her to (A.) get Lyra to safety if she’s still in the city, and (B.) to please send somepony to rescue me—and, possibly, Lyra—from out of the caverns. And whatever you do, Aldrovanda, do *not* talk to the pink alicorn with the cutie mark shaped like a crystal heart; again, she’s Queen Chrysalis. Do you understand all that?”

The kelpie was silent for a moment, considering, and then said, haltingly, “Yes. Yes, I can do that.” More confidently, she added, “I can most certainly do that. Yes indeed. Count on me, Mendax.” She glanced up at the Bugul Noz. “I realize yours is a busy life—horrific slander against entire races won’t commit itself, after all—but do you think you might spare me a moment to show me the way out of this, ah, unique little place of yours?” The Bugul Noz looked down at Bon Bon, who nodded, and then said, “Go back forty paces, close thy een for forty heartbeats, an’ when thou openst thy een again thou willst find thysel’ at the foot o’ my menhir. Thou willst hae tae guide thysel’ from there.”

Aldrovanda bent herself down in an elaborate bow. “You have my *undying* gratitude. Note the emphasis.” She raised herself up, and with an insincere smile plastered across her face, turned to Bon Bon. “Well. I’d best be off, hadn’t I? It *has* been fun. Seeya.” She dropped back below the water’s surface, and slithered off the way they had come.

The Bugul Noz watched her go, and once she was out of sight turned to Bon Bon. “I dinnae think that was wise, wee leanan sídhe. That one has treachery running through her veins.”

Bon Bon wrapped a length of the rope tightly around the exposed iron of the poker, bound it in place with a somewhat messily-tied knot, and slung the whole arrangement over her back. “That’s what I’m counting on. She’ll go straight to Chrysalis, of course, and tell her everything. If Lyra’s still in the city, Chrysalis will banish her to the caves upon learning that she’s connected with me, a grand traitor who deserves the harshest punishment—and if Lyra isn’t in the city, then Chrysalis will feel cheated by the fact that not only have I escaped punishment, but am trying to save her, and she’ll drag both of us up to the surface for something harsher than merely being forgotten. Escaping from the latter will be hard, but at least we’ll be out of the caves, and with Lyra by my side—well, we’ll manage something. Either way,” she said, giving one final tug on the rope binding the poker to her back and satisfying herself that it wouldn’t slip off, “I win. Or at least, I lose slightly less than I was losing beforehoof.”

“Thou playst a risky game.”

“At this point, I have to.” She turned towards the cave entrance, and drew on her last dwindling reserves of strength. There was green glimmer around her forehead that flickered, faded, and then burst out in a tiny explosion of chartreuse flame, leaving a unicorn’s horn sprouting from her brow. Bon Bon stumbled, nearly fell, and then wearily brought herself back to her hooves again. Sun and Moon, that had taken more out of her than she had expected. It was a good thing she hadn’t tried to transform into a pegasus to fly to Canterlot; growing the necessary musculature would have been far more draining than creating a simple horn, and she never would have made it. The changeling turned her head back to the Bugul Noz, and said, “I won’t pretend that I don’t wish you would do more to help, but I can’t blame you, I guess—and what you have done has been incredibly helpful. Thank you very much.”

The great beast bowed. “Go. Thy friend needs thee.”

Bon Bon turned back to face the invisible threshold between the swamp and the cave, took a deep breath, sent a faint glimmer of light shining out from her horn, and stepped forward into the darkness.

“Lyra!”

A thin, reedy voice echoed out into the darkness, splintering as it bounced off crystal columns and buried itself in great sloping piles of rubble. Cold dark pools quivered imperceptibly as the dying sounds rolled past, and then grew still once more. The endless caverns returned to their slumber.

“Lyra! Can you hear me?”

The call was different this time, low and mellow and tinged with an Appleloosan twang. Buried away in winding burrows, gnarled little knockers looked up from their strange, ancient tasks, their stone-shod hooves held motionless against the cave walls as they strained to catch the distant sound. This was not a place to be calling and wandering. Not in the hungry dark. There should only be the clinking of stone against crystal and the drip of water. What was this fool, that she should be crying so loudly in the deeps? What was this fool, that she should dare remember herself to the world?

“Lyra, are you there? Answer me! It’s me! It’s Bon Bon!”

The accent was different, the pitch was different, the intonation was different—but the voice was the same, nonetheless. The knockers shook their yellowed heads, brittle glass manes creaking in the still air, and returned to their task, hammering with tiny hooves against the crystal walls. *Tap. Tap tap.* It was not their concern. *Tap.* The cave was greater than this interloper, whoever she might be. *Ta-tap tap. Tap.* It was darker than her. *Tappa-tap tap.* It was older.

“Lyra!”

Tap tap.

Tap.

• • •

The green glow of a changeling’s magic glimmered in the darkness as a creature that looked very much like a unicorn clambered down a mound of loose rock and crystal fragments. Her bruised body might have been a pale cream color, and perhaps her tangled mane and dirty tail were navy and rose, but in the green witchlight of her horn they had lost all their colors. Bon Bon half-slid, half-fell the last few yards, bringing a

miniature avalanche of pebbles and stones skittering down with her, and somewhat to her surprise managed to land on all four hooves. Well, three hooves and a scraped knee. Close enough.

The exhausted changeling raised herself upright and dimmed her horn, shivering as the blackness flowed around her. Reality withdrew and unreality slithered forward, bringing with it the doddering, emaciated scent of Faerie, weakened by millennia spent gnawing at itself in the dark. Bon Bon twitched her tail irritably, as if to bat away the cloying smell, and closed her eyes, trying to focus. She could feel another power here, something else pushing against the insistent pull of reality, something more recent and alive. Magic. More specifically, pony magic.

Unicorn magic.

Bon Bon's head bobbed to and fro, brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to pinpoint the direction of the magic, and then drifted to a halt. Yes. There, deeper and a little further up, where the crystals were larger and clustered more thickly together. That was the way. That was where Lyra was. She took a deep breath, set her horn glowing once more, and began clambering up the glassy face of a great slanting gypsum column.

Time, time, she needed more time! She wasn't sure how long she had been in the caves; perhaps half a day. Perhaps a full day. She was certainly tired enough for it to have been a full day, but she was sure, she was almost sure, that it hadn't been longer than that. No time to rest, though; even now Aldrovanda would be making her way up to Canterlot to betray her to Queen Chrysalis, and she had to get to Lyra first so that, whatever happened, they'd be together for it. Maybe, somehow, it would be all right. Maybe they would face Chrysalis together, filled with love for one another, and when the Queen tried to drain them of it she would be overwhelmed instead, drowned by their love like a pony drowned trying to drink a river dry. Maybe a gleam of magic would swirl around them, shining with rainbow light, and everything that belonged to Faerie would creep back into the shadows in fear. Maybe...

Maybe. Bon Bon chuckled mirthlessly, and began gingerly making her way along a fallen crystal column, riddled with cracks, that lay half-submerged in a dark pool with an unnervingly acidic smell. Maybe she wasn't a changeling anymore. Maybe she was a pony, normal and inoffensive to the universe, and maybe such a thing as "luck" could exist for her. Maybe she could be like Twilight Sparkle, or like the Cake's apprentice, or like Applejack, or the weather team captain or that odd quiet pegasus who lived near the Everfree or Miss Rarity.

Hah!

Or maybe the Bugul Noz was right, and maybe the cosmos itself loathed her and everything like her, and would give her no gifts and cut her no breaks. Maybe she was, quite literally, an abomination. Maybe—Bon Bon tumbled off the other end of the crystal column, hit the ground hard, and tottered back to her hooves. She paused for a moment to check that the rope bound around her midsection was still snugly tied, and gave it a tightening tug when she discovered that it wasn't. Time enough for "maybe"s later. It didn't matter whether she was fortune's favorite foal or the unluckiest beast under the Sun; either way, her task was the same.

The battered changeling dimmed her horn again and focused again, feeling for the warm thrum of unicorn magic. Yes, there it was again, and it was close, too, considering how strong it felt. Wonderful; it shouldn't take long at all for her to...Hm.

Bon Bon frowned. That was odd; for a moment, she could have sworn that she had sensed two threads of magic, one far weaker than the other. She let the light shining from her horn go out completely, straining to pick up the subtler undertones in the faint magical aura flowing around her. Yes, there it was again; another unicorn, far weaker than the first but definitely there. Or perhaps more than just one other; now that she concentrated on the second thread of magic, she could sense an odd echoing quality to it. There were two other ponies there, or maybe three. Four? It was hard to tell. They were so weak, though; they must be nearly dead. Bon Bon sat back on her haunches, exhaled, and focused. Three, probably, and then a strange sort of subharmonic in the magic, like the rumble of distant thunder or the creaking of an overburdened wooden beam about to give way. If she could only sense it a bit more clearly...

A livid green flash of Faerie burst against her mind, sending Bon Bon staggering back in shock. What was—what—it was so *strong*, stronger even than the unicorn she had sensed at first. Her horn flashed green, sending out great wasteful, panicked flares of light. The thing that had so suddenly come into being, somewhere out in the dark, was a changeling; she recognized the feel of the miasma rushing past her, ravenous and writhing with the taste of lies. It had come for the imprisoned ponies, starving and weakened by whatever torture they had been through. It had come for Lyra. It would kill Lyra. It had to be stopped.

Technically, what happened next was not an error of judgment on Bon Bon's part; this, however, was primarily because no judgment whatsoever was involved. Had she paused to think things through, it might have occurred to her that attempting something as difficult as a teleportation spell was probably not a wise idea, particularly since she wasn't

really a unicorn and had never dabbled much with magic. With a bit more time for reflection, she might also have realized what, exactly, performing such a demanding spell would do to her in her present weakened state. It would hardly leave her capable of going horn-to-horn with an unfriendly changeling. At the very most, she might be able to manage a witty insult or two, but even that was probably pushing it. She really wasn't feeling very witty at the moment.

But she was tired, she was scared, she was desperate, and at that moment, the only thing in her mind was the thought "SAVE LYRA NOW," running on loop and blaring at a few hundred mental decibels. So she gritted her teeth, fixed every fiber of her concentration on the source of the faint wisp of unicorn magic, and forced every last, lingering thread of her own magic through her horn.

Green fire blasted out and around Bon Bon, hissing and screeching against the air as the burning tongues of magic bit into the space around her, distorting and crushing it. The changeling winced and clenched her eyes shut, focusing on the spell and trying to ignore the intense headache that had just slammed against the base of her horn and was rapidly spreading to the rest of her head. She couldn't flub this; it had to work. She had to get to Lyra. Orange-red sparks swirled around her head; the spell, running out of control, was beginning to scorch her mane. Bon Bon snarled, and redoubled her focus. If it was setting her on fire, some of the power was being wasted, and if it was being wasted she wouldn't be able to teleport—and she needed to teleport, because she needed—to—get—to—*Lyra*.

• • •

"Ah, Princess Cadence. I'm so pleased to see that you're behaving yourself."

It was several minutes earlier and a several leagues away from the time and place of Bon Bon's attempted teleportation. A few dying flickers of green flame scudded across the gypsum floor of an angular cavern, dancing in little panicked eddies away from a tall, gangling changeling hovering in the air, her tattered wings whirring and her fanged mouth curved in a self-satisfied smirk. Perched atop her stringy, decaying mane was a strange growth that, from a certain angle and in the right light, could almost have been called a crown. The slender changeling fluttered down, corroded hooves clinking lightly against the ground, and flashed another smug smile at a ragged alicorn standing in the middle of the cave.

"So pleased, in fact, that I've brought you a little playmate. You know her, I think; I gather that you used to be her foalsitter. She would *not* stop talking about it." She

gestured to her right, where the limp body of a small lavender unicorn had quietly flamed into existence. “Sadly, she’s feeling a bit under the weather right now—she got feisty about a third of the way through the trip when I was dragging her down past Canterlot’s foundations, and I had to get a little rough with her—but she’ll live. For a while, anyway.”

The alicorn narrowed her eyes. “How dare you, Chrysalis!”

“‘How dare you?’ Seriously, now? Princess, I expect better from you! Next you’ll be telling me to ‘stop right there,’ or warning me that I’ll ‘never get away with it.’” Chrysalis made a strange little sound that could almost have been called a childish giggle, and then whisked around, scraggly tail flying wide so that its tip almost brushed against Cadence’s face. “As it happens, though, I *do* dare, I have no intention of stopping, and I *am* getting away with it. Twilight here,” she paused to give the unconscious unicorn a kick, “was the only one left who suspected me, and with her safely out of the way tomorrow’s wedding will go off without a hitch. Your dearly beloved Shining Armor, O Princess Mi Amore Cadenza, will soon be mine—*all* mine.” She giggled again. “Really, if you think about it, he’s stepping up in life. Betrothed to a princess, but marrying a queen—not bad, wouldn’t you say?”

Princess Cadence said nothing, while the glare she aimed at the gloating changeling queen said everything. Chrysalis shrugged. “Fine, give me the silent treatment. See what I care.” She raised her head, and called out, “Bridesmaids! Come!”

Three pairs of glimmering green eyes opened in the dark, and three unicorns dressed in incongruously festive dresses trotted forward, their hooves moving in eerie lockstep. They bowed in unison before the changeling, and chorused, “Yes, O Queen?”

Chrysalis smiled. “I have a minor addition to your tasklist. You are now to guard both the alicorn and this unicorn. Kill them if they attempt to escape.” She paused, considering. “Oh, and if they manage to overpower you, you will be unworthy of me, and you are to kill yourselves. The method doesn’t matter; whatever’s convenient at the time. Be creative.” She aimed a sidelong smirk at Cadence. “I *do* hope you continue to behave yourself, princess. You wouldn’t want their blood on your hooves, now would you?”

“You monster! You’ll never get—”

Fortunately for her dignity, Cadence wasn’t allowed to finish the sentence. With a skreeling, shrieking howl, a whirlwind of green flame exploded into existence between the queen and the princess, hissing madly as it scorched its way into being. Filaments of

harlequin fire flung themselves out from the central vortex, dancing chaotically away into the air, and with a grunt of pain a battered, bruised, and mildly singed unicorn tumbled out of nothingness to land in a heap at Chrysalis' hooves, her back to the changeling queen. The newcomer raised herself halfway upright, propping her body up on shaking forehooves, and gasped to nopony in particular, "Don't you *touch* her! Don't you—don't—" She realized she wasn't speaking to anypony, glanced wildly around, and spotted Cadence, who was currently staring slack-jawed at her and making "Whuh-whuh-whuh..." noises.

The newcomer blinked. "Oh. The strong one was an *alicorn*. But—" She craned her head back to look over her shoulder, and spotted Chrysalis. "Oh." She paused to consider. "Ponyfeathers. But there were others—I felt—" The pale unicorn noticed the three bewitched bridesmaids, standing at attention at Chrysalis' back, and yelped, "*Lyra!* Lyra, I'm here, it's me, I—" Then, to Chrysalis, "Don't you *dare* touch her, I'll kill you if you touch her, don't you dare—don't—don't—" She trailed off, managed one more weak "*Ponyfeathers,*" and then her hooves crumpled beneath her and she slid down on to the cave floor. There was long moment of silence.

"What," said Chrysalis.

Bon Bon, who was currently trying to stay conscious and finding it an unexpectedly demanding task, didn't respond. The changeling queen lowered her head and peered at the exhausted "unicorn" lying before her. "Who are you? Speak! How did you know that the princess was—Wait." She flicked her tongue out of her mouth, tasting the air. "You aren't a pony." Her tongue slithered out and back a second time. "You are Shee. And not just Shee, but a changeling." Her narrowed eyes widened, and her angular face was split by a fanged smile. "Ah, yes, I remember now. We met some days ago in Canterlot, near the delectable Shining Armor's little lair—though you had taken the shape of an earth pony then, I recall. You must be the traitor that shellycoat told me about; Mendax is your name, yes?"

"Bite iron," hissed Bon Bon. Chrysalis aimed a vicious kick at the limp changeling, and Bon Bon choked back a whimper as the razor edges of the queen's cavity-ridden hoof bit into her skin.

Princess Cadence gasped, and took a half step forward. "Stop it! Leave her alone!"

"Hold your tongue, pony! This doesn't concern you." The queen's horn flared with venomous light, and a wall of crystals ripped themselves up out of the cave floor, arcing

up and over the alicorn to seal her inside a crystalline cell, muffling her cries. Chrysalis' mouth twitched into a brief smile, and then she turned back to Bon Bon.

“Bite iron? My, you have quite the mouth on you, don't you?” The skeletal black creature's wings flickered out, and she lifted herself up into the air, hovering above Bon Bon. “And that's not the least of your crimes, is it?” She smirked. “You weren't quite as unseen as you thought. A shellycoat in the Great Basin saw what you did to that poor kelpie, and she came to me and told me everything. Normally I'd just leave you here to rot, but that seems too merciful, all things considered.” She raised a hoof and tapped her snout theatrically. “What shall I do with you? Take your own suggestion, and force iron down your throat, perhaps? It would be very satisfying, certainly, but even that doesn't strike me as quite harsh enough for your sins.” She considered for a few more seconds, and then turned her head towards the three bridesmaids. “You! Which of you is Lyra?”

Bon Bon wrenched herself back up to her forehooves. “No!”

“No, no!” mimicked the queen, giggling as the leftmost of the enchanted unicorns, pale green and wearing a dirty yellow silk dress, trotted robotically forward. The green light of changeling Glamour sparked in her eyes. With a whirring of her membranous wings, the changeling queen turned back to Lyra. “You! You knew this creature, didn't you?”

Lyra shook her head, and droned, “No, my Queen.”

Chrysalis raised an eyebrow. “No? But—Ah, of course.” She gave a casual toss of her horn, there was a flash of green fire at the crest of Bon Bon's navy and rose-colored mane, and the mare let out a shriek of pain as her horn was scorched out of existence. The changeling queen gestured at Bon Bon. “Now?”

Lyra nodded. “Yes, my Queen.”

“Excellent. You were fond of her?”

“I loved her.”

Chrysalis ran a thin tongue across her lips, as if savoring the memory of some delicious flavor, and continued, “And she is fond of you?”

“She loves me.”

“Charming. Well then,” the changeling queen said to Bon Bon, “that makes things fairly simple. We shouldn't have any trouble covering both the physical and psychological

aspects of your punishment, dearie.” She gestured for Lyra to come forward. “You, bridesmaid, are to kill this mare. Ah!” She raised a hoof as Lyra started towards Bon Bon, her face blank and her horn sparking with lethal energy. “Not quickly. It must be slow, slow and painful. I suggest pressing small pieces of iron against her skin. There is ancient mining equipment in these caves, so there should be nails and similar things lying around. You might also cut her up a bit in spots that won’t kill her immediately. Make her look like she’s been through Tartarus and back, you understand? Then, when she’s mere minutes from death, my power over you is to end. You are to remember who you are and who she is, and what you did to her.”

Chrysalis kneeled beside Bon Bon, who felt like screaming but couldn’t quite seem to get enough air into her lungs to do so, and with a slender hoof lifted the little changeling’s head, forcing Bon Bon to meet her gaze.

“And the last thing you see, little race-traitor, will be the pony that you’ve had the almighty gall to *dare* to love, howling with the kind of misery that shatters souls.” She let Bon Bon’s head drop back to the stone floor, straightened herself, and smiled.

“*Well.* That’s that taken care of, then. I’d stay to watch how you get on, but I have a lot to do right now, and quite frankly I don’t have the stomach to watch. I don’t take any pleasure in this, you know. I just want to make sure that justice is served.” The queen glanced around the vaulted crystal cavern, taking in Cadence’s cell, the unconscious lavender unicorn, her three enchanted bridesmaids, and Bon Bon, lying crumpled at her hooves. She smiled, and repeated, “That’s that taken care of. You two,” she said, gesturing at the two other bridesmaids—Bon Bon recognized one of them as Twinkleshine, the pony she had impersonated when speaking with Princess Luna, but the second was strange to her—“be sure to kill your compatriot after she’s done away with this changeling and is no longer under the influence of my Glamour. I can’t have her making a nuisance of herself.”

Chrysalis raised her horn, sent a flood of green fire swirling around her body, and assumed the shape of Princess Cadence. “This day really *has* been perfect,” she said. There was another burst of fire and flash of light, and with a crackling roar she was gone. The cavern was swallowed up in total darkness once again, and for a moment all was still and quiet.

For a moment.

Chlink.

Lyra's eyes gleamed in the darkness, her pupils flickering eerily as she made her way towards Bon Bon. With an effort that would have put an Ursa Major to shame, Bon Bon managed to lift her head, staring up at the approaching eyes. This couldn't happen. She couldn't let this happen.

“Yrrr’a...”

No good. Try again. Had to try again. The eyes drew closer, little flickers of golden magic slithering up the sharp horn above them.

“Lyra!”

Lyra didn't blink, didn't hesitate, didn't pause. *Chlink klok klip*. The sound of her hooves echoed in the darkness. Bon Bon forced herself to draw another breath, straining to keep her head upright. It was all her fault. Lyra deserved better. It *couldn't* end like this.

“Lyra, it's—it's me. It's Bon Bon. Don't—don't—you're stronger than—”

The pale green mare came to a halt in front of Bon Bon, staring blankly down at her. Several small, sharp stones lying on the cave floor shuddered, and then rose up into the air, wrapped in Lyra's magic. “*You might also cut her up a bit,*” Chrysalis had said. Lyra would be starting with that, then.

There wasn't any hope. She had failed. She was Unseelie after all, in the oldest and darkest meaning of the word: unlucky, cursed, and doomed. And now Lyra was doomed with her. It was all her fault; all those years of lies and half-truths, every time she resolved to tell Lyra what she really was and then put it off until “later”—that had caused this. She had caused this. “Lyra...Lyra, I'm so sorry.”

Lyra didn't react, her face impassive as she began to strike two of the stones together, knapping them to vicious sharpness. Bon Bon bowed her head. Their life used to be so happy; so very happy. She remembered the crisp autumn evenings back in Ponyville, when Lyra would trot through the front door exhausted from hours of playing her lyre at this wedding or that family reunion and brimming with happiness to be back at home again. She remembered the crackle of firelight, the taste of warm cocoa, and the warmth of Lyra's flank against her own as they cuddled together under a blanket in front of the hearth. She remembered helping Lyra stand upright, encouraging her in her strange, heartfelt hobbies, laughing at her stories and soothing her in her darker moods. She remembered Lyra soothing her in turn, comforting her when fey specters stalked through the darkness of her mind and the great howling madness of Faerie battered

against the safe, happy little world the changeling had constructed for herself. Lyra had always driven it away again. Even without knowing what she was fighting, without even knowing that she was fighting anything, the brave, beautiful mare had always driven it away. The warmth had always returned. It had been so wonderful.

Bon Bon knew that the memories were draining her. She was a changeling, and changelings fed on love; they didn't give it away. They couldn't afford to. The love for Lyra swelling within her was rushing out like a great glacial lake tearing its way free of an ice dam, ripping the last fragments of her own strength to pieces and carrying them with it as it flooded away.

She didn't care. The little Shee forced her head higher, meeting Lyra's eyes. She knew what she wanted her last words to be, and what she wanted her last thought to be.

"I love you, Lyra."

Even as she said it, a deeper blackness than the darkness of the caverns was already creeping in around the edge of her vision, and her thoughts were beginning to grow jumbled, fraying and snagging themselves on one another. As her sight dimmed, she saw—or thought she saw—a strange quiver in the Glamour filling Lyra's eyes, like a candle flame guttering in a sudden draught. She had no time to wonder what it meant, though. With the suddenness and finality of a thunderclap, her sight failed completely, and silence claimed her thoughts.

Half-sharpened stones rattled harmlessly down beside Bon Bon's body, released from the magic that had been holding them in the air. A pale green unicorn blinked eyes that still burned with Queen Chrysalis' Glamour, but only weakly. The Glamour was fed by love wrapped in purpose, and now, presented with two loves and two purposes, it strained against itself. The unicorn blinked again, and then noticed the mare lying at her hooves.

There was a cry in the darkness.

• • •

...Beneath the fire-red leaves...

...Or tossed upon the wind...

Slowly, feeling crept back into Bon Bon's body, ringing in her bones and aching in her muscles. What—where was she? What had happened? She tried to open her eyes, but couldn't quite manage it.

*I walked alone for many a day
On paths no pony...*

*...To far away,
Where fir and hemlock grows*

Bon Bon shivered. Snow—cold—something was cold underneath her. Cold and hard. Not snow, rock. She was in a cave, yes, that was right. But she felt something warm against her side, too, and—a song? Some pony was singing.

*She said, I've heard the wild winds howl
I've danced with Wendigos
I've flown above the drifting clouds
And dived beneath ice floes*

*But never, O, never she said to me
Never in all my days
Have I seen your love with her eyes of green
And her mark of shining rays*

It was a familiar song, an old folk tune loved by old ponies and smoothed to river-stone perfection by the thousands of tongues that had sung it. It reminded her of wood, and wool, and the gleam of brass. It felt safe. Bon Bon tried to move and immediately regretted it, whimpering at the pain stabbing at her limbs. The singer paused, and said, “Shh, Bonnie, shh. It’s okay. I’m here.” Then she drew a breath and continued.

*I walked alone for many a day
On paths no pony knows
I wandered South to far away,
Where fig and upas grows*

*I met an ahuitzotl there
Who swam by sunken trees
I told him of my long-lost love
And begged him tell me, please,*

*If ever, O, ever in jungle thick
Or on branch that bends and sways
Had he seen my love with her eyes of green
And her mark of shining rays*

*He said, I've heard the wild winds howl
I've fished in stream and mere
Mapinguari has hunted me
And I have hunted fear*

*But never, O, never he said to me
Never in all my days
Have I seen your love with her eyes of green
And her mark of shining rays*

It was impossible. It couldn't be. Chrysalis had enchanted—Lyra had been going to kill her. But she could feel a familiar heartbeat by her side, and could hear the familiar tones of her marefriend's voice. Bon Bon's blue-gray eyes flickered open, and she found herself looking into the unicorn's amber eyes, illuminated by the gentle golden glow of her horn. Lyra smiled, her eyes creased with happiness and tears glimmering at their corners, and continued singing. In a voice that began weak and then gradually grew stronger, Bon Bon joined in, and the two mares sang in harmony, their voices echoing together through the caverns beneath the Canterhorn.

*I walked alone for many a day
On paths nopony knows
I wandered Home from far away
Where oak and maple grows.*

*I met a hooded pony there
Who'd wandered overseas
I told her of my long-lost love
And begged her tell me, please,*

*If ever, O, ever on distant shore
Or in the sunlit bays
Had she seen my love with her eyes of green
And her mark of shining rays*

*She said, I've ventured West to fire
And East I've sallied forth
I've braved the heat of the sultry South
And the snows of the freezing North*

*But never, O, never she said to me
As her hood she withdrew
And looked at me with eyes of green
Did I stop looking for you.*

Thin whorls of smoke rose through the damp air, lit from below by a makeshift torch held awkwardly in Bon Bon's mouth and lit from the side by the glow of Lyra's horn. There was an occasional clink of stone as their hooves ground against loose crystal fragments or a lone splash when their cautious progress sent a pebble skittering down into some dark and invisible pool, but on the whole the two mares moved in silence. It seemed wiser. Far away and far above gleamed a mote of maybe-daylight that, hopefully, represented a way out of the caverns.

It was a bit too far away, considering the pace they were setting. Bon Bon could actually have traveled more quickly; her body still ached from all the abuse she had put it through during the past few days, but she could feel new strength flowing in to her tired muscles with every passing second she spent near Lyra, warmed and fed by her love. No, that wasn't the problem. Bon Bon peered up into the darkness, trying to gauge the distance, and then looked over her shoulder at Lyra, shuffling along behind her and still dressed in the butter-yellow bridesmaid dress she had been wearing when under Chrysalis' spell. She was walking strangely, dragging herself forward one hoof at a time like a pony trying to make headway against a powerful current. Bon Bon's brow creased with worry. Dropping the torch from her mouth and propping it up against a nearby stone, she said, "Sweetie? Are you sure you're okay?"

Lyra didn't look up, and continued her odd sidling shuffle. "I'll be fine. I can do this. The other two bridesmaids are still back there, so—that is, it's fine. You were out cold for nearly a day, and if you can trot around like that, I'm certainly fine." She paused, and then half-yelped, half-whimpered, "I'm *fine!*"

The little changeling trotted back to her marefriend's side. "Lyra, it's okay if you need to go back; I'll be alright."

"No. I can do this, I *want* to do this, I want to escape—I know I want to escape. I know that. I was working on something before you woke up, to help us escape—I found some old pieces of mining equipment and junk, and started patching it together into—that's proof, isn't it? That I could do that? I do want to escape!" The green unicorn gritted her teeth and clenched her eyes shut for a moment. When she opened them again there was a green flame burning deep within her pupils, faint but distinct. "But the princess and the Twilight Sparkle can't escape. They're not going anywhere. Not allowed to. Not going anywhere. Going to *rot*—" Lyra shuddered, foxfire flickering fitfully in her eyes. "Why am I *saying* this?" She raised her head and looked up at Bon Bon, her ears flat with fear. "Bon Bon, what's wrong with me? What's happened to me? I feel all wrong; I keep seeing

these little *animals* out of the corner of my eye, like tiny starved ponies with yellow manes, and—”

Bon Bon managed a smile. “And you’re worried that you’re seeing things? They’re real; don’t worry. They’re knockers; they live in caves like this. They’re harmless.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of...”

“Oh, well, I’ve learned a lot in the past few days.” *But not about knockers, which you’ve known about since your third instar, at least. You’re lying to her. Why are you still doing that? Why can’t you just be honest for once in your life? Horrible things have been happening to her, and she deserves to know who’s really to blame for them. You promised her you’d explain things.* “They’re a kind of...fairy, I guess you could call them. They need magic to live, but they can’t make it themselves, so they hunt out certain kinds of rock that make magic when struck, and hit them.”

Lyra blinked. “You mean like a piezothaumatic crystal?”

“Piezo...?”

“Piezothaumatic crystal. They’re really snazzy; they generate a magical field when pressure’s applied to them, and change their shape if they’re put in a magical field. I wanted to use them in the actuators of the Fing-er, but they were too darned pricey, so I had to settle for steam.” Lyra paused. “But that’s not the point. Fine, it’s great that the knocker things are real and I’m not hallucinating, but I wasn’t really worried about that anyway. I’m *thinking* wrong. I want things that I—that I don’t want. I feel like I need to go back and make sure that the prisoners don’t escape, and the feeling just gets stronger the further away I get from them. They can’t escape. They shouldn’t escape! I’ll kill them before they—before—” She stopped abruptly, a look of horror on her face, and then covered her eyes with her hooves. “And it’s worse than that. I want—well, I don’t, obviously, because I couldn’t want that, not ever, but I wanted to...I wanted...” Lyra trailed off, and looked desperately at the changeling mare.

“You wanted to hurt me,” finished Bon Bon.

The unicorn made a small, scared sound. Bon Bon drew Lyra into a tight hug, holding her marefriend’s shivering body to her own. “But you didn’t. You didn’t because you’re strong, you understand? That *creature*”—she spat the word—“put you under the strongest spell that she could muster, but we broke through it, you and I. She couldn’t beat us. It’s not all over yet, but we are going to beat her, no matter what. You are going

to be free, free of all of this, and you will never have to deal with this evil mess again. No matter what else may happen, I promise that.”

• • •

In the end, Lyra hadn't been able to do it. The pull of Chrysalis' Glamour was still far too strong, and as determined as she was to beat down the changeling dwimmer ensnaring her mind, the fact of the matter was that they simply were not moving fast enough. There wasn't much time; they had no food, and most of the water they had come across had been limned with disturbingly orange crystals and smelled of acid. As she watched Lyra trot slowly back towards the Queen's prison, Bon Bon sighed. She wanted so much to follow her, stay with her, and comfort her, but—well. They had to get help.

Bon Bon closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Sometimes there was no right path, and then all that was left was to take the necessary path. That was what she was doing now. It was what she needed to do. It was all she could do. She trotted back to where she had left the torch, gripped it firmly in her mouth, and trotted on, her gaze dancing between the distant flicker of light, far away and far above, and the rough, rubble-strewn path ahead of her. The cave was rougher here than it had been near Chrysalis' prison, and as she moved forward she found herself having to scramble up huge slopes of loose rock, primed to collapse in a sweeping rush of sharp-edged boulders, or edging across thin crystal platforms spreading out like fungal brackets over deep gulfs. At one point she entered a sort of narrow arroyo, with a traversable floor bordered by great soaring walls. In its center, stretching from one wall to the next, was an odd bowl-shaped hollow, its sides layered with loose pebbles like the banks of an antlion's nest and rising and falling in strange hummocks and pits that left much of the basin's walls cloaked in shadow. As she walked across the basin, a stone cracked nastily beneath her hoof, snapping apart into several pieces. She brought the torch down to examine the fragments. They were white and curved in odd ways; funny, they looked almost like...

Bon Bon reared back. Bone. The ground was covered in little broken pieces of bone. They hadn't all come from the piece she had stepped on, either; now that she examined her surroundings more closely, she could see other bones lying helter-skelter on the cave floor nearby. Ribs arced up out of crevices between stones, shoulder blades lay scattered here and there like enormous oyster shells, disarticulated bits that might have been finger bones and might have been vertebrae were spread amongst the pebbles, and nestled under a small rock overhang, its bleached surface shining in the light of her torch, lay a tiny, elfin skull. For a horrible moment Bon Bon thought that it had belonged to a foal, but closer inspection showed a beaklike jaw free of teeth, and strangely bulbous eye

sockets shaped to hold huge dark-adapted eyes. It had been a knocker, then. The bone was gouged with long furrowed tooth marks where something had gnawed at it.

She raised her torch. There were too many bones here for just one knocker to have left them, and there wasn't enough detritus on the floor for this to be a pitfall trap, fed from some invisible hole in the cave's ceiling. She began to trot forward, and then froze. What she had originally taken to be nothing more than shadowed depressions in the slopes of the pit, kept dark by a trick of the light and the chance orientation of her torch, were still just as black as before, even though she—and the torchlight—had moved. She waved her head side to side, sending shadows sliding along the cave floor and darting from one pebble to another—but the slanted, arching shadows draped across the pit's walls remained exactly as they were. They weren't just dips in the surface of the pit; they were gaping holes, too deep for her torchlight to illuminate. Or rather, not holes. Burrows.

The changeling stood still for a long, silent moment, and then very slowly lowered her torch and picked her way towards the opposite side of the pit, trying not to step on any bones. Or pebbles. Or the cave floor in general, actually. She glanced to the side, her ears plastered against the back of her head. The mouths of the burrows yawned tall and black around her. She raised a hoof and laid it gingerly on a massive slab of mica that had slid down the pit's slope, and winced at the faint crunching sound as she set her weight on the stone. A quick glance back. Nothing was stirring.

Bon Bon gave an irritable swish of her tail. This was ridiculous. Yes, there were quite possibly several horrible hungry things very nearby—please don't be bugganes, please please *please* don't be bugganes, the Shee told stories about those evil magic-eating things—and yes, if they woke up she would be in many different kinds of trouble, but they hadn't noticed all the noises she had made when stumbling into this pit, and they probably wouldn't notice the noises she'd make getting out again. One hoof in front of the other, only step on the largest stones, don't move too suddenly, one hoof in front of the other...

Sooner than she would have thought possible, she was pulling herself up over the far rim of the pit, unnoticed and uneaten. The little Shee allowed herself to breathe out. That had been silly of her. There was no sense in hunting fear. For all she knew, whatever had killed those knockers had left or died centuries ago.

Still, as she trotted away from the pit, she stepped a bit more lightly than she had before, and every so often she threw a cautious glance over her shoulder, watching the shadows for the curve of tusks or scythe-like claws.

• • •

The light of Bon Bon's torch flickered beneath solemn flowstone towers, juddering along in waving fits and starts as the Shee crawled, ant-like, across the surface of fallen crystal titans and up long, slanting slopes of loose detritus. Her eyes were on the steady, gleaming patch of daylight far above, but her mind was otherwise occupied, brooding on her last conversation with Lyra.

She had lied. *Again*, after all that had happened, after all that she had done and all that she had failed to do, she had still lied to the one pony she loved more than all the rest of the world. All her fine resolutions, and her promise to Lyra to tell the truth—had any of it meant anything? Lyra had given her so much, and made her so happy. She deserved the truth.

Bon Bon sighed. The truth. But what and who was she? Even her name was a lie. "Bon Bon" had never really existed, after all; the quiet, homely little pony with the navy and rose mane, the cream-colored coat, and the talent for sweet-making wasn't real. She was nothing but a mask invented by the changeling Mendax, whose name literally meant mendacious, deceitful, deceptive, untruthful, false.

Liar.

It couldn't go on. It *should not be allowed* to go on. Lyra deserved so much more than what she could give her. Bon Bon came to a halt, laid her torch on the ground, and stared up into the soaring gulfs above her, eyes aching, and drew a deep, ragged breath. She had promised Lyra that she would be free of the whole entangling mess of the Unseelie Court, safe and free, and there was really only one way to keep that promise.

No more selfishness, no more half-measures, no more lies. She would see Lyra to safety, beyond the caves of the Canterhorn and beyond the reach of Chrysalis and the Unseelie Court. She would tell Lyra the truth about herself. Then, rather than beg for forgiveness that she didn't deserve and that, she told herself, she had no right to expect, she would take herself out of Lyra's life and crawl back into the wheedling miasma of Faerie, where she and everything like her belonged. Tír na nÓg would take her, and Lyra would finally be able to live free of the enchantments of the Shee.

A faint, poisonous green scent drifted up out of the cold stone, bringing with it echoing whispers and the hollow piping of bone flutes played by soft white paws. A drop of water, falling from some lone stalactite far above, sped by Bon Bon's face and then slowed to a standstill near her hocks. It hovered for a moment, then slammed itself down against the

cave floor with impossible speed, scattering droplets that splashed and skipped across the stone surface in crazy, unwholesome patterns. Bon Bon hissed, snatched her torch up from the cave floor, and barked, “Not yet! I’m not yours yet!”

There was a distant tapping—maybe the sound of knockers, hammering unreality out of the reluctant stone, or maybe the beat of skin drums—and then the piping stilled. The smell faded. The muttered whispering began to drift away as well, although Bon Bon could still make out some distinct phrases: *Shale, blood, and the red, red moon...Tír na nÓg glaonna...Do you see my claws, my tusks, my great red mouth? I see, I see...Why is she not dead? Where is she? How did she get past my bridesmaids?*

The mare froze. That last echo—Oh no. She couldn’t have come back now—it wasn’t *fair*—Bon Bon closed her eyes and tried to ignore the faint warm glow of her torch, still smoldering on the cave floor. Had to concentrate. Feel out through Faerie, but don’t be consumed by it. There, yes. There was the faint touch of magic, the dominant thrum of an alicorn’s power and the echoing background of four unicorns. But just as she had feared, there was another thread of magic present, a writhing feral thing filled with lies and wildness that coiled about and smothered the others: the Glamour of Queen Chrysalis.

It was pointless to return, of course. Even at the best of times she was no match for the changeling queen, and these were very far from being the best of times. If she returned, she’d only make a hostage of herself again, and this time Chrysalis wouldn’t make the mistake of leaving her to an unsupervised execution. The sensible, rational thing would be to get help as soon as possible, and trust to Lyra’s cleverness to bluff her way to safety.

By the time all this had occurred to her she was already in full gallop, dashing back as fast as she could towards the oubliette and towards Lyra. Sensibility could hang. Lyra needed help, and needed help now, and right now Bon Bon was all that Lyra had. The changeling half-slid, half-tumbled down a mound of rubble, skidded across a moist plateau of flowstone and bounced painfully off a fallen pillar, barely made a jump over a chasm that had taken her thirty minutes to skirt around when she had been traveling outward, tumbled down another slope, leapt, dashed, climbed, fell, galloped—

—And halted, so suddenly that she almost toppled over face first in to the pit gaping before her. She was back at the rim of the macabre bone-filled basin she had crossed earlier. Well, she had made it through once without any trouble, and there was no reason to expect the second time to be any different. As quickly as she dared, Bon Bon made her way down into the pit, and began picking her way across the uneven floor, trying not to step on any loose rocks or bones. Granted, the odds were pretty good that whatever had

lived here was long gone, but no sense in taking chances. Running into a cave dragon or an olm—or, Epona forfend, a buggane—would be almost as bad as meeting Chrysalis herself.

Bon Bon paused, balanced precariously on three hooves with her fourth stretched out over a particularly bone-crowded patch of stone. Almost as bad as Chrysalis...

No, that was a bad idea. That was a *really* bad, suicidally bad idea. It would almost certainly make things worse.

She brought her hoof back, raised her torch, and swung it around, trying to gauge which of the burrows looked the largest.

Really, really, *really* stupid idea. Stupidest thing you could possibly do. No.

She glanced to her left, sizing up how difficult it would be to take the far side of the pit at a dead run. Might be possible. Might actually work.

Monumentally, flabbergastingly stupid idea.

She glanced back to the largest burrow mouth, returned her attention to the pit slope, and then considered the length of ground between the two. She tried to remember the terrain between the pit and Chrysalis' prison, thought about how much of it she would be able to make at a full gallop, and wondered whether there was room for a much larger creature to follow her.

Don't even think about it.

She thought about it.

• • •

Queen Chrysalis' dull blue tail, membranous and tattered, whipped angrily in the air as she stalked to and fro in front of Princess Cadence's prison. A small hole had been smashed into the side of the alicorn's cell, and Chrysalis had dragged Cadence's head through it, locking her in place with a ring of crystal spikes pressed tight against her neck. The changeling queen came to a halt, her back to the trapped princess, and said, "Well. I am a patient soul, I hope, but everyone has their breaking point, and you, princess, have just reached mine." Her horn flickered with green light, and Cadence whimpered as the crystals around her neck grew inward, biting deeper into her skin. "I am going to ask one last time, and if I don't receive a satisfactory answer, you will be

losing that lovely head of yours. The traitor I left to be executed has mysteriously vanished. Twilight here”—she nodded towards her second prisoner, the lavender unicorn lying unconscious on the cave floor—“has not been in a condition to perform valiant rescues, and the mare herself was hardly going to be going anywhere under her own power.” The queen turned, and stared into Cadence’s eyes. “I could taste her weakness, and it was most certainly not feigned. This leaves, then, only you as a possible culprit behind her disappearance, my pretty little pony princess. So, one last time”—The crystals grew by another fraction of a centimeter, and a drop of blood appeared on the alicorn’s rosy coat—“where is she?”

“I—I really don’t—I couldn’t see or hear anything, I—” Cadence trailed off in a choking gasp as the jagged noose around her neck tightened.

The changeling queen shrugged. “That’s a shame. I had been planning to keep you around as insurance in case anything went wrong, but I suppose Twilight Sparkle will still make a more than adequate hostage, should it come to that. Goodbye, princ—”

“She didn’t do it!”

Tattered wings buzzing, Chrysalis whirred about to face the three unicorns she had enchanted to serve as her bridesmaids. Lyra had stepped forward and was staring up at the queen, her ears flattened and her body tense. In a shaky but clear voice, she repeated, “She didn’t do it.”

Chrysalis flitted down out of the air, staring with wide eyes at Lyra. After about a second she seemed to realize that her mouth was hanging open, and snapped it shut. The lanky changeling raised a hoof, lowered it, made an incoherent questioning noise, and then stammered, “You—You were under my Glamour. I distinctly remember you being under my—how did you—” She gestured at the other two bridesmaids, standing at attention “—*they* aren’t, are they?—this shouldn’t be possible!”

Lyra swallowed, and in a stronger voice than before, answered, “Yeah, well, it is possible. Bon Bon and I, we beat your spell. The princess had nothing to do with it.” She glared steadily up, meeting Chrysalis’ eyes. Only a very astute observer would have noticed that she was shivering.

The changeling queen slid a forked tongue across her fangs. Behind her, Cadence gasped as the crystal vise drew back into the rock, and without turning she said, “I will be closing that opening in five seconds, princess. I would suggest removing your neck from it before I do.” Cadence did so. There was a sound like the shattering of frozen trees in midwinter

as crystalline shafts spread out to seal the princess back inside her prison, and then the changeling queen said to Lyra, “Well then. Most impressive. Where, pray tell, is ‘Bon Bon’ now? I would love to ask her how she accomplished this extraordinary feat.”

“I don’t know, and if I did I wouldn’t—” The words ended in yelp of pain as Chrysalis wrenched the unicorn up into the air, holding her aloft in a glittering green cloud of magic. She flipped Lyra upside down, and bringing her face to within a few centimeters of the pale green mare’s, Chrysalis hissed, “Oh, you would tell me. Perhaps the alicorn’s mind is a bit too complex for me to beguile, but it would take me but a moment to sink you under my Glamour again, and then you would be horrified by the thought that you had ever even dreamed of defying me. So, since you will pardon me for not taking you at your word, I think it’s high time I put you back under my control.”

SHAAAAA hou hou hou hou hoouuu!

Chrysalis started and cocked her ears, straining to catch the dying echoes of the weird, ululating scream that had just swept through the cave. The green web of magic surrounding Lyra loosened slightly. “...later. I’ll put you back under my control later. As soon as I learn what that noise was.” She paused, and eyed Lyra suspiciously. “*You* don’t know what—”

SHAAAA AH Ah hou hou hou! Shra HAAAAaaaa!

The magic suspending Lyra in the air dissolved entirely, letting her fall to the cave floor with a muted thunk. Chrysalis whipped her wings into motion, rising up several body lengths into the air as she brightened the light shining from her gnarled horn and flooded the crevices of the crystalline chamber with light. The call was nearer now, and as its echoes faded there came the sound of hoof beats approaching at a mad gallop.

SHAAA ARAhahaooo!

Rocks and dislodged crystal fragments clattered out from a small opening about halfway up the walls of the chamber, and moments later Bon Bon emerged, kicking and squirming desperately as she fought to work her way through the hole. Still struggling, she glanced over the scene laid out below her, spotted Lyra, and whinnied, “Lyra! Lyra, run! Run!” Then, with one last flailing contortion the little changeling broke free of the crevice and half-tumbled, half-galloped down a steep incline to the floor of the chamber. “It’s coming! Get away get away RUN!”

There was a blaze of green flame, and both Lyra and Bon Bon were swept up into the air, suspended by Queen Chrysalis' magic. She bared her teeth and snarled in Bon Bon's face, "What's coming, you horrible little unkillable worm? What did you *do*?"

SHRAAHAAA!

The crevice Bon Bon had wriggled through exploded outward in a hail of rock and shattered crystal, battering the queen and her captives with sharp-edged bits of shrapnel. A hulking something, shrouded in a cloud of rock dust and easily twice as tall as the changeling queen, rushed out of the jagged void with another piercing shriek and plunged down. An immense, four-taloned claw slashed out of the haze of dust, and very nearly decapitated Chrysalis, who had leapt out of the way only just in time, dropping Lyra and Bon Bon as she jumped. The great beast spun around to face her, and as its long, shaggy black tail swept through the air, the dust was blown aside to reveal a towering monster, twelve feet tall and covered in matted black hair. It stood on stocky clawed feet, built like a gigantic mole's, and its gaping froglike mouth was framed by six wickedly upcurving tusks. It had no visible eyes, but there was a scorch mark in the hair on the right side of its head where an eye might normally have been found. Bon Bon tightened her grip on the torch in her mouth.

There was a brief moment of shocked stillness, and then the monstrosity lunged at Chrysalis, its fangs bared and howling like the north wind. The changeling queen threw herself up into the air, screaming, "A *buggane*? You crazy, iron-brained, Seelie fool! Bell-addled! Sun-dazzl—Augh!" She snapped her wings flat and fell to the floor, losing a few inches of her mane in the process as the *buggane*'s huge claw sliced through the space she had been occupying a fraction of a second earlier. Another twirl of her wings and she went rolling sideways and upward out of the behemoth's reach, her horn flaring with venomous light. "You called up a magic-eater! You imbecilic, deranged maniac!" A bolt of magic shot out from her horn, hissing and crackling as it burned through the space in its path, and then died like a sunbeam in a murky pond against the *buggane*'s hide. Chrysalis' eyes widened. "Bridesmaids! Run away! You're no use heeAAAUGH!" The *buggane* had crouched down on its muscular hind legs and launched itself into the air, nearly hitting the changeling queen in the process. It slammed into the opposite wall of the chamber and stuck there, digging its gigantic claws into the living rock and sending tiny pieces of pulverized stone clattering on to the cave floor as it slowly turned, twisting itself upside down like a monstrous gecko. It raised its head towards the queen, clearly gauging her location with whatever subterranean senses it possessed, while Chrysalis flapped backwards, green fire writhing up her horn as she readied herself for another blast of magic.

The buggane jumped.

Chrysalis fired.

WHANckrnch. Chrysalis' spell had struck the creature in the very center of its forehead, sinking in like a stone dropped into loose sand, and the monster had spasmed, causing it to barely miss the changeling queen and slam hard into the cave wall to her left. It scabbled at the wall for a moment before losing its grip, and then rolled down on to the cave floor, where it rested for a moment, twitching. At length it raised itself to its hind legs, swaying like a column about to fall, and lunged at Chrysalis. The queen's horn flared and another beam of magic plunged into the buggane's forehead. Its pace slowed from a gallop, to a walk, to an amble—and then it stood motionless, towering above Chrysalis as she gritted her teeth and poured torrents of burning Glamour directly into the stupefied creature's brain. She continued casting the spell for nearly thirty seconds after the creature had come to a halt, and then, slowly and fearfully, she broke the connection and stepped back, watching the monster with a wary eye.

It remained where it was, staring down at her with eyes burning with green fire. Queen Chrysalis exhaled. "A buggane. I have *slaved* a buggane! I, Queen Chrysalis, alone among all the Shee of this day or any other, now wield such terrible might that I have met one of the Dark Shee in open battle and triumphed against...triumphed..."

Her voice trailed off as she realized that she was playing to an empty house. The bridesmaids had fled, as she had ordered; Twilight Sparkle was still unconscious (though showing signs of waking); Cadence was locked inside her prison; and Lyra and Bon Bon were nowhere to be seen. Chrysalis shrieked in frustration.

"That treacherous little—Ugh! You!" She glared up at the buggane, standing massive and silent at her side. "Find the creature who led you here, and kill her! Rip her to shreds, crush her, eat her, I don't care; just kill her! Kill her all over EVERYTHING!"

The buggane dropped to all fours with a ground-shaking thud, and loped silently off on huge padded feet. Chrysalis watched it go, panting heavily, and then snarled, "Bridesmai—Iron and bells, that's right, they're gone too." She slammed a corroded hoof against the crystal floor a bit too hard, and then yelped at the pain. "Smelt it! This day was going to be *perfect*; I was supposed to be enjoying myself." She flopped down on the cave floor, forehooves crossed and tail lashing in irritation. "I need some 'me' time." The changeling queen glanced over at Twilight, sprawled on the ground and stirring as she slowly worked her way back to consciousness, and smiled. Yes. Yes, that should do nicely. Green flame slithered up her body, burning away her changeling shape and

replacing it with Princess Cadence's body, and her horn dimmed, plunging the chamber into darkness. It was an indulgence, certainly, but she'd been through a lot today, and she thought that she deserved to indulge herself a little bit. A spot of prisoner-taunting would be just the thing to return her to her usual sunny self.

A wild autumn wind whipped past the dusk-shadowed Canterhorn, flowing swift and cold around the rough bluestone ridges of the megalith. Deep below, Bon Bon was still wandering through the caverns searching for Lyra, far above Queen Chrysalis was still dancing and flitting through wedding preparations that were not her own, and Lyra and two other ponies still ambled after the changeling queen, puppets playing the part of perfect bridesmaids. One of the others was a dentist who had had the misfortune to comment to “Princess Cadence” on the peculiar appearance of her teeth, and another a hapless citizen of Canterlot, one Twinkleshine by name, who Bon Bon had impersonated some nights before when she had given her warning to Princess Luna and Captain Shining Armor. In the depths of the Canterhorn a shaggy thing of shadows and hunger slumbered in its pit, surrounded by the bones of smaller fae that it had overtaken and devoured. And high above it all Princess Luna stood and looked over the shining lights of the royal city, waiting and worrying as the cold winds swirled around her.

It was a moment of stillness and expectation. Soon, very soon, things would begin to happen, beginning slowly and subtly but gradually picking up speed and importance as each event triggered other events. Terror and awe, the breaking and mending of hearts, and the downfall and salvation of kingdoms—they all stood in the balance, poised on the brink between potential and reality and waiting for the coming of the pebble that would start the avalanche. Or, perhaps, not even a pebble. A snowflake would do just as well.

A small white thing rose in front of the dark bulk of the Canterhorn, dipping and weaving like a bubble rising through rough water as it struggled up through the whirling winds. It was a male pegasus, or at least bore a vague resemblance to one, absurdly overmuscled and ill-proportioned as it was. Its comically tiny wings whirred against the air and the muscles in its thick neck bulged with effort, and as it gained altitude a peculiar clinking and clattering could occasionally be heard from its body, as if, somewhere beneath the ridiculous layers of muscle and sinew, loose pieces of metal or stone were waving around and bumping into one another. Its eyes were unusually glossy, glinting so brilliantly with reflected light that an observer would have been hard-pressed to say what, exactly, they looked like. Every so often, though, its flailing ascent would bring it close enough to the spires of the Canterhorn to cast it in deeper shadow, and in those moments its eyes took on a strange appearance unlike the eyes of any pony that had ever lived.

Aldrovanda had had some trouble with this transformation. Apart from everything else, kelpies normally didn’t mess around with any other appearance than that of an earth pony; wings and horns were complications best left to changelings, and besides, flight

meant venturing far away from the soothing moisture of bog and river. Making matters worse were the pebbles, sticks, shells, wooden bits, and other detritus glued to the kelpie's body, which prevented her from adopting any of the trim, svelte forms she usually took when attempting to seduce her prey to their deaths. She had toyed with the idea of appearing as a morbidly obese pegasus, hiding the doorknob, saddlebag, and other junk under a cloak of Glamour-crafted fat, but the idea repelled her. It lacked elegance. Ultimately, she had settled on her current hypertrophied shape, bulging with false muscles thick enough to cloak the refuse clinging to her real body. Ungainly as it was, it did amuse her. Aldrovanda was lazy even by the standards of a sit-and-wait ambush predator, and she had found it hilarious when she had first learned, years ago, that some ponies actually went out of their way to exercise. Why not take this chance to poke a little fun at them? She had a job to do in Canterlot, granted, but there was no reason she couldn't amuse herself while doing it. She had always felt that life was made for mocking those stupider than herself. And then maybe eating them. The mockery was the main thing, though, and imitation was the highest form of mockery.

As the overhanging spires of the great royal city drew nearer, though, gleaming red in the light of the setting sun, the kelpie had to acknowledge to herself that she was no longer exactly sure what the job that she had to do was. It had seemed clear enough when she had set out; she would report Bon Bon's shenanigans to Chrysalis, doing her duty as a vassal of the Unseelie Court, and she'd finally be back in the black with Queen Xubidu and would be able to put all that nasty business with the crown prince and the cannibalism and the dereliction of duty behind her. Then she could get back to her swamp and start noshing on rotting turtle carcasses and frogs again, unbothered by anyone. It had seemed such a nice, simple, satisfying plan.

Now, though, her path didn't seem quite so clear. All the denial and repression at her command were still not quite enough to keep her from dwelling uncomfortably on her recent meeting with the Bugul Noz, the disturbing—patently untrue, of course, and downright blasphemous, but still disturbing—things that Bon Bon had said to her, and the absolutely terrifying things that Bon Bon had implied. The kelpie hissed irritably. She was immortal, of course; that was true. It had always been true, and it would always be true, no matter what. She was absolutely almost sure of that.

But...well. Aldrovanda reflected ruefully that the changeling had been right about one thing: the immortality question aside, she *did* look far more like a shellycoat, now, than she did a kelpie. She didn't really have anyone to vouch for her back in the Court; she had never been one for making friends. What would Chrysalis do when confronted with something that looked like a shellycoat and claimed it was a kelpie? Worse yet—Aldrovanda shuddered, and nearly crashed into the face of the Canterhorn as her

looping flight path zigged when it should have zagged—what would *Xubidu* do? She had to admit to herself that, all in all, the whole thing tasted more like the heretical ramblings of a shellycoat than anything else. Perhaps her original plans would need to be altered somewhat. Perhaps she needed to review the situation.

A few bars of an old song, the lyrics altered somewhat to suit her own distressing situation, flitted through her mind before being mercilessly swatted down. She didn't do singing. That was for ponies. Aldrovanda's tiny wings continued to beat, propelling her outrageous bulk upwards towards Chrysalis, Canterlot, and the interwoven destinies of Equestria and the Unseelie Court.

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Time passed.

Mistakes were made.

Spells were broken.

Songs were sung.

Monsters were awoken.

Bon Bon galloped for her life past crystal spires and chasms, the torch clenched in her mouth guttering in the wind as she threw herself down great sloping mounds of rubble and squirmed through sharp-edged crevices. The rope bound around her midsection, wrapped around the iron poker that it held in place, had grown frayed and tattered.

Shaaa ah hou hou Hou HOU!

Blast it, the thing was getting closer. Thank Celestia, it hadn't touched Lyra; when it had first burst upon the two of them, tearing its way out of what had looked like a perfectly solid wall of stone, it had completely ignored her marefriend and lunged after Bon Bon. For whatever reason, now that it had finished with Chrysalis, the magic-eater seemed to be only interested in her. Bon Bon supposed this might possibly be because she had been the one who had jabbed an iron poker into its eye in the first place. She didn't know where Lyra was now; when the buggane had first attacked and sent Bon Bon careening off at a dead run, her marefriend had started to head after her, but then had skidded to a halt, eyes wide, and galloped off in the opposite direction shouting something about a machine. Considering how horribly everything else had been going lately, this probably just meant that the unicorn had gone insane, but Bon Bon decided that it might be fun,

just for the chuckles, to pretend that Lyra had some plan in mind. What the hay, a little stupid optimism couldn't hurt.

Which was all well and good, except that at this point Bon Bon was very nearly running blind, dashing through parts of the caves that she wasn't familiar with and throwing herself down scree slopes because the only way she could hope to outpace the buggane was by falling. She started to look back over her shoulder, and then whipped her head forward again, cursing herself for her stupidity. It wasn't as if she could do anything about it, even if it was right behind her. Had to keep moving. Maybe it would grow bored, or would bumble into a nest of knockers, or spontaneously combust, or something. Something would be nice. She could really do with a nice, *alicorn ex machina* of a something any moment now.

SHRAA ah HAAAA!

Too close. Much, much too close. The little changeling leapt down another slope of loose rock, and then, in a flailing whirl of limbs, tried to leap back up again. The slope ended not in a flat stone floor but in a gulf, yawning hungrily below her. She slid down to the rim, rocks bouncing around her as she tried to scramble back up, managed to pause for a moment at the edge, and then overbalanced. The torch flew from her mouth as she tumbled down into the pit, letting loose one desperate cry as she fell.

—And then cried again as she hit rock, hard enough to bruise her body but, thank Celestia, not hard enough to break it. A moment later she heard the clatter of the torch skidding across the stone floor some ways away from her. She saw, or thought she saw, the red glimmer of smoldering wood, and then the light faded. The plummeting rush down into the pit had been too much for the little flame, and it had gone out, leaving Bon Bon in total darkness.

Unfortunately, the silence was less than total. The buggane was no longer howling, but as Bon Bon lay in the dark, her eyes open but unseeing, she could hear the beast making its way towards her. Worse, she could feel the buggane approaching, moving step by monstrous step out of the nightmares of the Shee. The magic-eater didn't burn with Unseelie light, warping reality around it and filling the air with chattering whispers, but neither did it feel like the Bugul Noz's swamp, solid and real with not a trace of magic to be felt. It was a hole in existence, an absence of both reality and unreality, and Bon Bon could sense ambient wisps of Faerie flowing past her, sinking up and rising down into the living nothingness that was the buggane. The magic-eaters were Shee, but they lacked the normal ability of the Shee to fabricate their own web of Faerie. They lived only by

hunting magical beings, and against them all but the most powerful spells were less than useless.

Pebbles rattled down from above as the buggane made its cautious way down the slope of the pit, careful not to lose its footing as Bon Bon had. It was taking its time; it must have realized that she was trapped. Bon Bon craned her head back, and tugged at the length of rope bound around her midsection, pulling it loose and letting the iron poker fall to the cave floor with a metallic clank. It wasn't much of a defense against the monstrosity stalking towards her, but maybe...maybe she'd be lucky, and scare it off. Maybe, just once, the universe wouldn't be paying attention at the crucial moment, and it wouldn't swat her down. Maybe something would work, for once. She bit down on the poker's wooden guard and angled her head up into the darkness, listening for the sound of the buggane's movements and trying to gauge its position. Just once. She only had to be lucky once.

Above, closer than she had thought, loose rock flakes cracked beneath the weight of an enormous paw. Bon Bon bent down and then whipped her neck up, sending the poker whirling off towards the buggane. It just had to hit its eye, or nose, or mouth—anywhere with exposed skin. That was all she needed.

There was the sound of metal clattering against stone, somewhere above and beyond the buggane. The beast itself hooted briefly, but it was a sound of confusion, not of pain. She had missed. Bon Bon slumped down to the cave floor, defeated. It had never been a real chance, anyway. Just one last, defiant gesture, flung out against an unfriendly universe that had, seemingly, set itself against her and everything she held dear. Everything she had ever done, both good and bad, was pointless, wasted, worthless—

“Bon Bon! Bon Bon, was that you? I'm coming, hold on!”

Lyra's voice. The little changeling raised her head. “Lyra, stay away! You can't fight this thing! Run while you still—”

“Like *hay* I'm running!” To Bon Bon's dismay, the faint golden light of Lyra's magic had begun to illuminate the cave, gleaming off crystal facets and outlining the crawling shape of the buggane in dim silhouette. The monster paused, and half-twisted its body up, looking back up towards the source of the light. Bon Bon could hear a strange thudding and clicking somewhere off beyond the rim of the pit, out of her view; she couldn't think why, but there was an oddly familiar rhythm to it. Lyra's voice rang out again. “Yikes. I think it sees me. Bon Bon, do you know anything about this thing? Any Achilles' fetlocks that I should know about?”

No. Lyra had to escape. Bon Bon no longer really cared what her own fate was, but Lyra *had* to get out of this alive. “Run! Just—that thing is a buggane! Just run! There’s no point in fighting!”

“Nothing doing!” The buggane hoisted itself up over the rim of the pit, its great black body limned with golden light.

Bon Bon bit her lip, and then yelled, “Iron! Iron burns it! There’s a poker up there; grab it!”

The shadow of the buggane disappeared as it leapt forward, claws raised and tusked jaw gaping wide. There was a sound like a hardware store having a panic attack, and the buggane howled in what might have been frustration. The apparent hardware store continued its spirited high-step, Lyra gave a brief yelp, and there was a screech of metal against stone.

The buggane screamed!

For one long, horrible moment Bon Bon thought that it was bellowing its victory. Then she heard it draw a long, choking breath, and it continued hooting, its voice weak and warbling.

Hou hou hou hou houuu... A hou HOU Hou hooouuu...

It was...it was whimpering. Whimpering! “Yeah, you *better* leave Bon Bon alone, ya dumb buggin!” crowed Lyra. Bon Bon didn’t think that she had ever heard anything more beautiful than her marefriend’s voice right at that moment. The metallic clanking and clattering from earlier resumed, and there was a dull whack and the hiss of iron against Fae skin. The buggane’s whimpers rose into an almost-howl. “G’wan! Get the hay out of here! Go on, ugly, scoot!”

Bon Bon winced. “Lyra, don’t antagonize it!”

“It antagonized *me!*” The shaggy black monster growled, and then hooted in pain once more. “I said GO!” snapped Lyra. There was another grating snarl from the buggane, and then, incredibly, Bon Bon heard the sound of claws scraping against stone as the beast slowly and reluctantly withdrew. It was leaving. It was gone. Neither of them had been eaten.

As Bon Bon was struggling with the idea that something she had been involved in might have turned out well, the strange metallic clattering and clunking she had heard earlier

resumed, and the light of Lyra's horn began to grow brighter over the rim of the pit. The mare looked up. "Lyra! Be careful! There's a hole here! Just a second, I've got a rope. I can tie one end around a rock and throw it up to you, and then you can pull me out. Just stay up there."

"Not fast enough. I can't stay away from that prison long, I *need* to get back, have to make sure they don't—Hold on, I'll come down and get you."

Ah, yes. There was the misfortune Bon Bon had been waiting for. For a second she had almost thought nothing would go wrong. "No, seriously! I really don't think either of us can climb out of here, it's four or five yards deep at least, you'd betteaaAUGH!"

Bon Bon scrambled back, mouth agape. Instead of the slender unicorn she had been expecting to see, a great spider-like mass of bars and shafts had risen over the edge of the pit, filled with small spinning flecks of light and glinting in the glow of her marefriend's horn. A long iron and wood leg that looked like it had been built from a length of minecart track raised itself up and plunged down into the slope of the rubble mound, anchoring itself firmly in place with a thick crunch. The angular, creaking contrivance shifted forward, moving its entire bulk into view and revealing Lyra. The poker floated beside her in the grasp of her magic as she sat grinning in the very midst of the bird's nest of machinery, regal as a Saddle Arabian sultan lounging on his throne.

"Awp," said Bon Bon.

Lyra flashed a smile so wide it was a wonder the top of her head didn't fall off. "Meet the Fing-er Mark 2.0! Bon Bon, Fing-er Mark 2.0. Fing-er Mark 2.0, Bon Bon." She sent a bolt of magic streaking out of her horn into a huge blue-black crystal mounted at her side, each of its facets connected to a different shaft or pulley, and twiddled several knobs in front of her. The massive machine lurched forward, crawling sideways down the slope of the rubble mound like a giant, friendly crab. Lyra paused the Fing-er at the lower rim that Bon Bon had tumbled off of, sent it creeping along the edge for a bit, and then let it drop itself down once she had found a portion of the pit wall that she was reasonably sure it could climb back out by. Another flip of a lever, and the ramshackle collection of gears, cogs, and repurposed mining equipment settled creakily down to the cave floor. Lyra slouched back in the old wooden mine cart she had converted into a cockpit, and beckoned to Bon Bon. "All aboard, me hearty!"

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“—and then when you told me that there were piezothaumatic crystals here in the cave, I figured that I might just be able to make the thing work. The frame and a lot of the works I put together while you were knocked out, and once I had the crystals to provide power, all I needed was to finish the inner workings. Luckily, I found an old clockwork hoist system earlier, and that gave me a lot of the parts I needed. Lucky break, really; it was mostly buried, and I only found it ‘cause I dinged a hoof on a piece of it sticking out from under—”

Bon Bon let Lyra chatter happily on without saying much, interposing comments just enough to keep the unicorn from worrying. She was feeling a bit dazed, both by the speed and bumpiness of their ride and by the fact that—well, that she wasn’t dead. That Lyra wasn’t dead. That her insane gambit with the buggane might have actually *worked*. If the beast had done away with Chrysalis before coming after her, then maybe the invasion itself would be called off, and if that was the case...well. She raised a hoof to her forehead and massaged it. The concept of a happy ending was one that she was having a little trouble wrapping her mind around.

She glanced over at Lyra, working the controls with practiced skill and describing the details of something called an epicyclic differential, and sighed. No, she was forgetting. That wasn’t how their story could end. The innocent got happy endings, but she, Mendax—she wasn’t so innocent. This was still all her fault, and Lyra deserved somepony so much better than her. It would hurt both of them, but she couldn’t stay in Lyra’s life. It wasn’t safe for the unicorn, and she deserved somepony better than Bon Bon.

“—so in the end, what I could find wasn’t quite enough, and I had use some mockup spells to fill in the gaps. Honestly, I’m amazed it’s still holding up; half of these gears aren’t even completely real, and there are a few that are spinning two different ways at once or only exist every four seconds or stuff like that. I give it a few more hours at most before it starts falling apart, so I guess we’d better make the most of it while we’ve got it, eh?” Lyra glanced back, and her ears drooped in concern. “Bon Bon, are you okay?” She guided the Fing-er Mark 2.0 to a standstill and reached out a hoof to her marefriend, gently nudging Bon Bon’s chin up. “Hay now, what’s wrong? Are you crying?”

Bon Bon pulled her head away. “No, it’s—no, I’m fine. Really, it’s just—a lot has happened today,” she finished lamely. She swallowed hard, and then forced a smile. “Just a little stress, I guess.”

“You *can* tell me, Bon Bon. It doesn’t matter what it is, you can always tell me. Don’t shut me out.”

“Not this. Not yet. Soon, I promise you, but not yet.” She drew a deep breath that was only a little ragged around the edges. Lyra held Bon Bon’s gaze for a long, long moment, and then turned her back to the changeling and started the machine up again. Bon Bon laid a hoof on Lyra’s back.

“I’m sorry, Lyra, believe me I am, and I promise I’ll tell you everything soon, just as soon as I know you’re—we’re safe. I wish I could tell you now, but I...but you...” The mare trailed off. *But you might leave, you might panic, you run away into the dark and lose yourself there. I have to get you to the surface, where you don’t need a Shee by your side to keep you safe. Where you’ll be free to run from me, if that’s what you end up doing.*

The pale green unicorn’s shoulders slumped. “It’s just hard, you know? You can’t tell me some things; I guess I’m used to that. It’s the way it’s always been. But it’s just so hard for me when I can see that the things you can’t tell me are hurting you so badly. I just feel so helpless.”

“But it’s almost over.”

Lyra gave a humorless chuckle. “Yeah. You said that a few days ago too, didn’t you? And then next thing I knew I was wrapped up in this ridiculous dress, that *thing* had messed around with my brain and made me think I was her recently-discovered great-niece three times removed, and was going to be her bridesmaid. I wonder what’ll happen this time?” She paused, and looked over her shoulder at the cream-colored mare. “Oh, that reminds me. Chrysalis said you were a ‘traitor.’ What did she mean by...” Lyra’s voice faltered at the pinched look on Bon Bon’s face. “...Ah. Won’t tell me that either, then.”

Bon Bon bowed her head, ears drooping. “I’m so sorry, Lyra, so, so sorry.”

“Yeah.” The green unicorn turned back to the controls. The machine plodded on.

Some minutes passed during which neither of them said anything—Lyra because she’d said everything she had to say, and Bon Bon because she couldn’t stand to hear herself talk. Eventually, though, the silence began to become too oppressive, and the changeling broke it with a nervous, “So, the Fing-er Mark 2.0. It’s amazing, and I can’t believe you put it together so quickly, but it doesn’t really look like the Fing-er; it’s more of a giant...spider-y thing. Why did you call it that?”

Over the whirring and clicking of the works, Lyra said, “Check the number of legs.”

Bon Bon looked over the rim of the wooden mine cart at the interlocking web of iron and wood surrounding her, counted, and then exclaimed, “Oh!”

Lyra nodded. “Yup.”

“Is there any particular reason you decided to...?”

“Well, since I’ve spent ages working the bugs out of that pattern, I figured I might as well make use of it. It made more sense to go with a design that I was familiar with.”

“Ah, right.”

They trundled onward, the Fing-er Mark 2.0 crawling back through the caves towards the site of Princess Cadence’s prison on its five long, spindly legs, arranged around the central chassis like a dragon’s claws around its palm.

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Navigating back was easier than Bon Bon would have predicted—but then, she hadn’t quite comprehended the extent of the damage that the buggane had done while it was chasing her. After the first few minutes, she gave up trying to remember if she had seen this flowstone deposit or that crystal-encrusted ceiling before, and began just acting as a spotter for Lyra, pointing out fresh gashes in the cave floor or recently-shattered walls. Their pace was good, and despite the fact that much of the path was uphill, scarcely twenty minutes had passed before Lyra was easing the giant mechanical claw down to the ground on a crystal surface scored with fractures and littered with mechanical detritus. She hopped out, helped Bon Bon to the ground, and then trotted up a gentle incline towards a narrow opening framed between two great slanted gypsum shafts, Bon Bon following. Just before she reached the opening Lyra crouched and motioned for her marefriend to do the same. She whispered, “I have to go. Can’t leave ‘em unguarded. They can’t escape, they aren’t *allowed* to—sorry. I can’t help it. Be careful, and if Chrysalis is in there...well, you’ll probably know whether she’s there just from what you hear. I guess you should probably stay here and lay low for now. Be safe, Bonnie.”

Bon Bon nodded mutely. Lyra gave a small smile, stood, and trotted through the opening into the cave beyond.

For a few moments, all was quiet aside from the sound of Lyra working her way down the scree slope on the other side of the hole. Then there was the ctok pok of hooves on stone, a faint gasp—and the stillness of the caves was broken by an angry scream, ringing with frustration and fear. The little changeling’s head shot up and she galloped after Lyra, sharp-edged crystal flakes crunching under her hooves.

Lyra stood, swaying with shock, staring at the ruins of the cell Chrysalis had created for the princess. Devastation surrounded her. Jagged craters had been blasted into the floor and walls, scattering half-melted rock shards and dust across the cave, and there was a strange smell in the air like the sharp, fierce scent before a thunderstorm. The remnants of the oubliette were lying broken and scorched on the cave floor. Both the alicorn and unicorn were gone, and there was a double trail of hoofprints in the rock dust leading away from the chamber and towards the distant, glimmering spot of light that Bon Bon and Lyra had tried to reach earlier.

After scrambled down the scree slope as fast as she dared, Bon Bon hurried to Lyra's side. "What happened? Are you all right? Is there—"

The unicorn staggered around to face Bon Bon, her ears flattened and the whites of her eyes showing. The green light of Chrysalis' Glamour in Lyra's eyes was not a flicker now but a full-blown blaze, churning and swirling like the hungry sucking flames of a firestorm, and Bon Bon involuntarily took a half-step back before she caught herself. Lyra howled, "They're *gone!* They're both gone, but they can't be, but they are! Bon Bon, I need to find them! *I need to find them!*" As she spoke she scurried back and forth across the cavern, moving like a mouse trapped in a corner by an approaching cat. "Where did they go? Hoofprints. I can follow the hoofprints, I can find the light before they do. I'll stop them and—*Hnnph!*"

Lyra sprawled on to the cave floor, knocked sideways in mid-gallop by Bon Bon, who had thrown herself against the unicorn with all the force she could muster. The changeling propped herself up and crawled over to her marefriend, who was lying on her back and staring up into space, breathing shallowly. "Lyra, are you okay? I'm so sorry, I didn't want to, but you were about to go galloping off and I couldn't think of any other way to stop you."

The unicorn gasped up at the cave ceiling for another second or two, and then shifted her head slightly, looking up at her worried marefriend. "No, no, it's fine, I'm great—but I can't let them go, Bon Bon, *I can't!* You don't understand; it's like—like them being free is breaking the world, breaking my mind, and I just can't *be* if they're not locked up. I can't do it, I can't just run away. Every step of the way I'd be dragging my hooves, I'd try to run off, I might even hurt you."

Bon Bon nuzzled the shivering unicorn. "What else can we do, though?"

"I don't know." Lyra's voice quavered. Bon Bon could tell it was taking every last scrap of her willpower to stay here, lying still while the two prisoners got further and further

away. “Maybe—maybe I could go after them, and you could follow me. Yes! They’ll be at the hole to the surface, I can get there and stop them, and then I can—you can—we’ll be near the exit, but I have to take them back, but I can’t, but I *have* to...” She shut her eyes tightly, drew a deep breath, and then said as quickly as possible, “WhenWeGetThereYouCouldKnockMeOutAndThenMaybeTheAlicornCouldFixMeAndWeCouldAllGetOut—NO!”

Lyra jumped to her hooves, eyes burning green. “I can’t—Stop me! Sorry, Bonnie, I can’t let you stop—” Bon Bon rose, and Lyra leapt back, shouting, “DON’T! Stay away, but don’t—don’t let me out of your sight. Don’t let me lose you!” She continued to back away from the changeling, moving in odd juddering backwards leaps, and then swung around and rocketed off towards the distant light, Bon Bon in hot pursuit.

She tried to match Lyra’s speed. Sun and Moon, she tried so hard. But Bon Bon had not been galloping for more than a few minutes before she realized that it was a lost cause. Even had nothing else been working against her, she would have been hard put to it to keep pace; Lyra had always been slender and strong, and although the unicorn wasn’t athletic, per se, she had at least kept herself active. Bon Bon, on the other hand, had been living a long life of quiet domesticity that was deeply unusual for her kind. Changelings needed the regular exercise and excitement of being driven out of villages by angry mobs after their latest victim had been drained of life, and months upon months spent wandering through the wilds in search of another suitable host kept one fit. Bon Bon had had none of that, and it told.

Even so, she might have had a chance if that had been all that she was against; Lyra was struggling against herself, while Bon Bon had all of her own will at her command. As Lyra galloped ahead of her, though, the light shining from the mare’s horn began to spark erratically, flaring out in sudden bursts of light and sending abrupt trails of sparks streaking down her mane to glint and vanish like sparks from a fire striker. Then there was a great, blinding flash, and Lyra vanished—and reappeared instantly, still in full gallop and not much more than several body lengths further on. Of course. She was trying to teleport, and at the same time trying desperately not to teleport. Another burst of light, another reappearance—she was far ahead now, and the darkness behind Bon Bon was creeping closer as Lyra’s light receded. The pale mare forced her aching limbs forward, speeding after a rapidly dwindling hope.

“Lyra!”

But the distant light flared and vanished for a third time—and didn’t reappear. The darkness of the cave slammed down around her. Far away and far above she could still

see the faint gleam of the distant cave exit, too dim and too distant to illuminate her surroundings, and she thought for a moment that she had seen the light brighten minutely, glittering with an infinitesimal spark of gold—but perhaps not. Her tired limbs slowed, and she cantered to a halt. With Lyra’s love, she had enough strength left to create a horn for herself, and maybe to teleport across that distance—but once there, she would be next to useless, if not actually dead. She could save her strength, but she’d never get there in time. The Fing-er might be able to handle rough terrain better than she could, but it needed magic to run, and she didn’t know how to control it. She could run forward in the dark, guiding herself by the distant light—but there were ravines, there were pitfalls, there were sinkholes and acidic pools and hungry shapes crawling in the deep places.

Bon Bon wearily turned, setting her back to the light. Perhaps Lyra and the other two enchanted bridesmaids would succeed, and would bring back the princess and the unicorn. Perhaps. And perhaps, if they did, she would see the light of their arrival, and would be able to pick her way back to the oubliette that Chrysalis had prepared. If they were all to be forgotten, well...the least that she could do would be to make sure that she and Lyra were forgotten together. For a moment Bon Bon stood, staring dully into the darkness, and then slumped to the ground in defeat.

It was over.

Somewhere in the distant dark of a trackless cave, water droplets oozed their way down unseen stalactites, tracing the smooth stone with a thin lacquer of calcite, and then dropped with echoing *plinks* to some abyss below. A minute passed. Water flowed, rock eroded, crystals grew, and the thousand timeless tasks of the cave continued on their slow, ancient way. Several minutes passed. There was the distant sound of a knocker, tapping timid rhythms on a crystal facet. The echoes faded away. More than a few minutes passed. Bon Bon closed her eyes, and—

“So is that it, then?”

Bon Bon opened her eyes. Well. This wasn't something she had expected. She supposed she should probably be surprised.

Somehow, though, she wasn't. She wasn't surprised at all. Speaking into the dark, she said, “What are you doing here, Aldrovanda?”

The nearby voice chuckled. “Following you; what else?”

“Why? You hate me.”

“What can I say? As I once noted, you have a very winning personality, and I find myself drawn to it, like a moth to flame. I seem to have spent all my life chasing after you, now, and I suppose it must have just become a habit.”

“Right. Of course.” Well, that was it; the cosmos definitely hated her. Every last hope for her or for Lyra being ground out of existence, she might have been willing to put down to cruel chance, but this last insult, heaped daintily atop all the injuries like a cherry atop a mountain of ice cream—this had to be deliberate. “You followed Chrysalis down, I suppose?” She wasn't particularly interested in the answer, but Hay, it wasn't like she was doing anything else. Might as well make conversation. Why not?

“Queen Cheeselegs? No no no no. I grace these delightfully damp caves solely due to my own efforts.” There was a sound not unlike a large basket filled with wind chimes and maracas being vigorously shaken, which Bon Bon took to mean that the detritus-festooned kelpie had lowered herself into a sitting position. There was a brief burst of odor like the smell of decaying fish, which faded quickly. “Well worth it, in the end.”

Bon Bon sighed. “You're the reason she dragged Lyra down here, though, right? You went to the queen and told her everything?”

Aldrovanda's voice took on a wheedling, plaintive note. "Oh come now, Mendax, must you insist on casting the worst possible light on things? I assure you I can explain everything. You see, I decided that I'd rather salvage my own standing in the Court than help you, so I went ahead and betrayed you to Queen Chrysalis." She paused and considered. "You know, that phrase 'I can explain everything' is really not all it's cracked up to be. That didn't help my case at *all*. Oh, and I told her that you murdered me, as well; I hope you don't mind."

The changeling blinked. She wouldn't have believed it, but apparently the bizarre, twisted creature was capable of being outrageous enough to surprise her, even now. "You're probably going to have to run that by me again."

"Well, while I of course give no credence to your heathenly maunderings, I do have to acknowledge that at this point, I don't quite look as a kelpie ought to look. It occurred to me that 'ol seaweed mane—why yes, as a matter of fact I *am* one to talk, my mane looks like lakeweed, there's a vast difference—might not believe that I'm myself, considering my present appearance. So I said that I was a shellycoat named Utricularia and that I had seen you kill and devour the poor, defenseless kelpie Aldrovanda during your trek across the boggy basin."

"Devour?" Bon Bon's brow wrinkled. "Aldrovanda, I'm a changeling. We don't eat anything; we just live off of the love that we steal—or sometimes, although we don't often deserve it, the love that's given to us."

"Oh?" The kelpie's voice took on a surprised note. "Well, that explains why Her Royal Gangliness looked so revolted, then. Crimes against nature itself, and so on. I had wondered about that."

"It also explains why she decided to have me tortured to death."

"Did she? Well, well, well." Aldrovanda considered this, and then added, "I gather that it didn't take? You seem to be distinctly not dead."

Bon Bon found, somewhat to her surprise, that she wasn't able to muster up anything resembling anger. Huh. So this was what despair was like.

Interesting.

"Yes, well, I'm very resilient, I guess. Not that it matters now, but how did you even find me?"

“How did I find you?” The Shee cackled gleefully. “What do you mean, ‘how did I find you?’ You didn’t make it difficult! First there was that sweet, touching little duet that—”

“Make a joke about that and I will kill you.”

Fancy that. She could still do anger.

Aldrovanda hesitated. “Ah. Yes. Well, in any case, you and your—your sweetheart have fine, strong voices—lovely song, by the way, I mean I didn’t listen in, of course, because obviously it was a very private sort of thing and—yes, okay, moving on. Anyway, I, ah, managed to figure out where you were, and afterwards it was hardly likely that I’d be able to lose you again, what with the screaming and clattering and the howling.”

She chortled again. The kelpie seemed to be in an excellent mood. “You are a fascinating individual, Mendax, you truly are. A depraved race traitor with iron in your veins, maybe. Completely and totally out of your little changeling mind, perhaps. But fascinating, nonetheless. Do you know, I really thought you’d been crushed at last? I mean, you were half dead, with nothing but a little bar of iron and some rope to your name—and you were up against Chrysalis, high queen of the changeling clan! Surely, I said to myself, surely now she’s done for. But then you waved your wand and tapped your hooves together three times, and suddenly there’s a *buggane* roaring and hooting and trying to tear Chrysalis into about fifteen different pieces. A *buggane*! I admit without shame that I was marginally impressed. A tour de force, truly.”

Bon Bon said something which could perhaps best be approximated as “Hrnnph.” There was a rattle in the dark as the kelpie, presumably, gestured with a hoof.

“And I suppose, if I’m being quite fair, your pet—sorry, sorry, you know what I mean—didn’t do too badly either. For a mortal, that is. In she swept atop her contraption, all iron and wood and I don’t know what else, and she just charged the boggity beastie and started jabbing away at it with a poker. Showed verve, that. Spunk. Chutzpah. Again, not bad for a mortal. Not at all bad. Frankly, kind of...good. Y’know. For a mortal.” She paused, and then continued in a hesitant tone, “Now, know that in saying this I am in no way validating your truly *obscene* proclivities, but...that pony? She’s a keeper.”

“So glad you approve. In the hopes that this is the last time I will ever have to ask this question, what do you want?” Please, Celestia, let her just go away. Please. This wasn’t *fair*.

“You don’t know? After your recent spectacular exhibition?” There was a note of genuine surprise in the kelpie’s voice. “I want to see what you do next, of course.”

“Ah. I’m entertainment, then.” Bon Bon sighed. “Well, my plan is to sit here and wait for Lyra and the other bridesmaids to get back with the alicorn and the unicorn. Then I was thinking Lyra and I could starve to death over the course of the next month or so. That’s—pretty much the extent of my itinerary. You’re welcome to watch, as long as you don’t talk. I guess you could eat us after we die; you’ve done that kind of thing before, I gather.”

“I see.” The kelpie paused. “Granted that the inner workings of your peculiar little mind are often utterly beyond my ken, but I don’t exactly follow how that results in the two of you trotting happily off into the sunset. No doubt I have merely missed some cunning twist devised by that Marechiavellian brain of yours.”

“No twist. We starve, we die, Chrysalis wins, Equestria falls. Do I have to say it, kelpie? You want to hear it? Fine. I’ll say it. It’s all over. I. Give. Up.”

There was a long, heavy silence, thick with thought and sadness—and then Aldrovanda gave a derisive laugh.

“No you don’t.”

Bon Bon scowled. “What?”

“I realize that this may be particularly difficult for you, Mendax, but at least try not to be an idiot. You don’t give up. You never give up. I have more than learned that by this point. Let’s review, shall we? When you first learned of the attack, I advised you to get rid of your ladylove and hide yourself away. You ignored me. She was taken as a hostage, and I was left in her place. You decided to steal her back. I stole your saddlebag. You carried on preparations without it. I got you kicked out of the train, miles and miles from the Canterhorn. You set out on hoof. I stole your bundle. You marched off nonetheless, and it took me hours before I found you again. You arrived at the foot of the Canterhorn, with no way in, and a smelted *God* popped up like a squirrel out of a hole and laid out the red carpet for you. Chrysalis tried to kill you, and you sicced a *buggane* on her! You just never stop!”

Bon Bon raised her head. This was—this was almost like encouragement. From *Aldrovanda*. That—what—what. What?

There was a clinking and clattering as the kelpie rose to her hooves. “I refuse to accept that where *I’ve* failed to stop you, something else will succeed. Mark me, Mendax! I take the mere suggestion as a personal insult! You’re the first *Seelie* Shee to have lived since Danu knows how many thousands of years ago! Give up? *You?* Hah!”

“Aa,” said Bon Bon. Her brain and her mouth had apparently had some sort of falling out, and weren’t talking to one another. “Abda...mna. Op.” She tried again. “A—Aaa—Aldrovanda? You just—did you just give me a *pep talk?*”

The kelpie sniffed. “Epona forfend. I was merely pointing out a few simple home truths that you, apparently, are too obtuse to see for yourself.” She paused. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks,” said Bon Bon automatically. Aldrovanda snickered, but the changeling didn’t correct herself. She was thinking.

Some minutes passed—surprisingly, in silence. Aldrovanda waited in the dark, showing uncharacteristic patience, while Bon Bon pondered. At length, she rose to her hooves. “You called me ‘Seelie,’ just now.”

“Oh, please don’t pretend to be offended. I know perfectly well you don’t have any racial pride to wound. One must face facts, Mendax. You are about as far from being Unseelie as it is possible to get and still be of the Shee.”

“I suppose that’s so.” Bon Bon turned, raising her head to look up at the minute speck of light gleaming somewhere far above—the way out of the caverns, the way to Lyra. Her eyes had adapted to the dark at this point, and she could just make out the light-rimmed silhouette of Aldrovanda, her head cocked as if awaiting the answer to a question. “Yes. I suppose that’s so.”

What was left that she could sacrifice? Her life? Much good that would do. What did she have left to dare? She’d already risked everything, and yet here she was. What could she do? She needed strength that she couldn’t spare, and time that she didn’t have.

What fears had she not yet faced?

Bon Bon drew a deep breath and spoke into the darkness, more thinking aloud than anything else. “I just don’t know what I still have to sacrifice—or, then again, I guess I do, really. I guess I do. There’s time enough here but not there, and it’s not so hard a path there but impossible here. Simple enough. And simple enough to get wrong.” She shrugged. “Well. Under the barrow-lintel with me, then. Aldrovanda, if I get lost in time, tell Lyra that...” She trailed off, and gave a humorless whinnying laugh. “Never mind.

You'd refuse out of simple spite, wouldn't you? No guarantees and no consolation for me." With a faint scraping of hooves against crystal, Bon Bon lowered herself to the cavern floor and closed her eyes. "Let's get this over with. *Tír na nÓg glaonna*, after all."

Aldrovanda stepped forward with a clunk and clatter. "You'll forgive me my confusion, Mendax, but I don't quite follow—"

"Quiet. Need to concentrate."

"Very well then." The kelpie shuffled back to her previous position. "I shall compose my soul, such as it is, in patience. Should make for a novel, instructive experience. I shall likely profit greatly from it, and shall emerge from the ordeal a better, deeper, wiser kelpie." Bon Bon didn't respond, reclining sphinx-like on the crystal slab with her head bowed and eyes closed. Delicate silver-white lines of light, falling from the distant cave exit, traced their way along the contours of her face and delineated it in strange silhouette. The sound of distant droplets, or perhaps the hoof-falls of even more distant knockers, echoed uncertainly through the cave. Seconds passed, dozens of seconds passed, minutes passed, and the silence of the deeps remained unbro—

"I have discovered that patience is boring," announced Aldrovanda. "Mendax, are you going to be doing anything interesting soon?"

No response.

"Mendax! Mendax, did you hear me? I require entertain..." Her voice trailed off, and she continued in a puzzled tone, "...ment. What are you doing?"

Bon Bon's head had begun to rise, slowly tilting up towards the far off speck of light, and as it shifted her eyelids began to drift glacially apart over unfocused eyes. Without really meaning to, Aldrovanda stepped back and raised one of her forehooves nervously. She could deal with the Unseelie and fey; she was quite comfortable with them, as a matter of fact. But it was hard to tell whether this was abnormal or not, and the uncertainty made her uneasy—and it didn't help that the light was so dim that she could hardly see what was going on. In a voice that was shriller than she had intended, she repeated, "What are you doing?"

The changeling didn't answer. Her head continued to tilt back, and her bangs, which had been shading her face, tumbled away and allowed the distant light to strike her eyes. In an instant her motion accelerated, her head whipping back and her gaze locking on to the distant light. Before the kelpie could say anything she snapped, "I said quiet."

“Yes, that’s all very well, but what are—”

“Balancing. *Quiet.*”

Aldrovanda opened her mouth, let it hang for a moment, and then snapped it shut again. There was an odd tension to Bon Bon’s body that made her think better of saying anything, a sense of tautness as if the little changeling were being stretched or strained along some dimension not normally accessible to either Shee or ponies. She rested like that for perhaps a minute, twitching like an inexperienced tightrope walker trying to maintain her balance, and then with infinite care she extended her legs beneath her, and rose to her hooves.

...Or at least that’s what *should* have happened in a sane, normal world. Rather than rising up from her position on the cave floor, though, as Bon Bon extended her legs they sank down into the crystal sheet beneath her, sliding smoothly into the solid rock as if it hadn’t been there at all. She looked almost like she was standing hock-deep in shallow water. There was a long, lingering moment of silence, and then Bon Bon raised one of her forehooves.

She stepped forward.

She started walking.

Aldrovanda followed, eyes wide as lily pads and mouth hanging agape. The changeling was moving like the distorted refraction of a fish on the surface of a disturbed pool, flickering and sliding from one place to another as she climbed invisible hills and scrambling down slopes that didn’t seem to exist. She would dip below the rock’s surface at times, vanishing from sight entirely, only to emerge in midair out of the face of a precipice—at which point she continued walking unperturbed up through the still damp air, her gaze constantly fixed on the faint gleam far above. Aldrovanda almost lost her at certain points, and if the kelpie hadn’t transformed back into her brawny, muscular pegasus shape and taken flight, she would have been left far behind. There were, indeed, a few points where she thought she had lost the trail (and a few other points where she nearly brained herself on stalactites or hanging limestone draperies), but overall she managed to keep up reasonably well, flapping and fluttering along after the changeling. All the while Bon Bon strode smoothly and purposefully ahead, a mote of determination rising impossibly up through stone, air, and darkness towards the daylight.

Chasms yawned, black and bottomless—and Bon Bon walked above them. A furious buggane lumbered through the depths, fresh scars burning on its snout and stomach—

but Bon Bon was beyond its reach. Poisonous pools, unstable slopes, an obnoxious kelpie, treacherous mine infrastructure—they might as well not have been there at all. With the grace of a heron stalking across a mist-covered lake, she walked above and beyond everything that should have hindered her, the light of day shining in her blue pony eyes and gleaming in the curls of her conservative, humdrum pony mane. It was not long at all before she had drawn level with an ancient flowstone platform not more than fifty meters from the source of the daylight, the smooth, glistening rock spreading out at the edges in great brittle sheets that traced the high water mark of some long-dried subterranean lake. Like a goat descending a mountain face, Bon Bon inched and sidled her way down to the middle of the rock surface. She paused above it, hovering, for some moments—and then with no warning the spell was broken and she fell forward with an undignified thump on to the stone ledge.

Aldrovanda flailed down out of the air beside her, making inarticulate spluttering noises and demanding...well, demanding something. Bon Bon wasn't really paying attention. The kelpie wanted explanations, probably, and apologies for some imagined slight, maybe, but Bon Bon, who was currently lying face down on the cold rock, did not bother to respond. She felt she needed a little quiet, real time before Act II began, and although it wasn't exactly pleasant she could think of few realer feelings than the sensation of cold, wet, hard rock pressing into one's face. The discomfort was soothing. There was absolutely nothing fey about it, and that was worth an awful lot to her at that moment.

Even if she had not had further feats to perform, though, Bon Bon would not have been able to rest for long; Aldrovanda was now bending all of her formidable talents at irritation to the task of getting the changeling to get up and give some explanation for what had just happened. At length, and with not a few grumbles and groans, Bon Bon rose to her hooves. The thing beside her continued to make shrill inquiring noises.

“Ugh...Yes, that was—that was what I meant to do. Yes. Like I said, I was balancing. No, I don't think you could learn how to do it. No, I'm not really listening to you, I'm just sort of guessing at what you're asking. Oh, my *head*...Give me a minute.”

She sighed, swayed slightly to one side and then righted herself, and blinked several times in rapid succession. Another sigh, more blinking, and several deep breaths. Okay. That was better. This was real, now, completely real. Epona and Danu...Celestia and Luna...She never wanted to have to do that again. She raised her head, and looked at Aldrovanda. “Okay, ask awa—” She came to an abrupt halt, staring at the kelpie's current heavily muscled, crew cut pegasus form.

Aldrovanda smiled innocently.

Bon Bon blinked once or twice, and then continued, "...Um. Yes. Ask away. But you'll have to do it while we're walking. I can't waste time." Without waiting for a response she turned and trotted off up a gentle incline of crystal, ducking to avoid scraping her head against the shallow roof of the caverns.

There was a clatter of hooves, and the bulky white Glamour-enshrouded Shee drew up alongside the changeling. "Mendax—"

"My name is Bon Bon."

"Right, that. Mendax, explain. All of it. How—that was patently impossible, you know. Shouldn't have happened. I'm not even sure *what* it was, but whatever it was, it shouldn't have happened."

Bon Bon paused, staring off into space as she tilted her head back and forth in an attempt to zero in on the distant thread of unicorn magic thrumming through the air. "Not much to explain. I was balancing, like I said."

"Yes, but on *what*?"

"The edge of Faerie and reality." A small, fierce smile of satisfaction flickered across the changeling's face. Yes, that was definitely the way. She could feel Lyra's magic, even feel the taut, clinging web of Glamour wrapped about it. The little unicorn was close, very close.

"You know, Mendax, I suspect you may not quite understand the basic concept behind an explanation. The point, you see, is to convey information, not make things more incomprehensible. A thousand pardons for daring to take even one moment more of your infinitely valuable time, but would you mind elaborating on that point a bit?"

Bon Bon swished her tail in irritation. "My name is Bon Bon. I couldn't get here through the caves, but in Faerie the path is pretty straightforward. Time flows too slowly in Faerie for me to get here in time, though. So I—hurry up, kelpie, there's not much time—so I balanced. I let myself almost fall into Faerie, pulled back at the last moment, and shifted myself around until I was existing in Faerie space but living in real time. I was walking on the edge between the two worlds, if you like. I used the light from the cave exit as an anchor of sorts to help keep me locked into the real world. Does that answer everything?"

"Do be sensible, Mendax. You might as well talk of being half alive and half dead, or half me and half stupid. It's impossible. I certainly couldn't do it."

“For goodness’ sake, Aldrovanda, you demanded that I entertain you with miracles, and I gave you a miracle. Do you *have* to have every last detail of it explained, as well?”

That was an easy one to answer. “Yes,” said the Shee.

“Fine, fine.” The changeling trotted along in silence for some moments, considering, and then continued, “I’m not sure, but I think the reason that it’s impossible for you is that you—and every other Shee, for that matter—are fey down to your very bones. You belong more to one world than another; you’re unbalanced, I guess. If you try to shift between the two worlds, you can’t help but fall one way or another. A normal pony would too, probably, if they knew how to bridge the gap. But I’m not like that.”

She came to a halt, looked up at the kelpie’s temporarily square-jawed face, and repeated, “I’m not like that at all. I’m a changeling who *loves*. And Celestia help her, Lyra loves me. So between her love for me and my love for her, I’m bound to both worlds. I’m balanced, and so I *can* balance. Because you know what? You were right. I *am* a sungrubbing perversion, I *am* a heretic, and I *am* the last and only Seelie Shee there is.” She paused for breath, and then snapped, “And my name is *Bon Bon*.”

Without waiting for a response, Bon Bon whisked around and set off again, the sound of her hooves echoing in the still air as she guided her way by the twinge of Lyra’s magic. Aldrovanda stood for a moment, at a loss for words, and then scampered after her.

• • •

“Bon Bon.”

Light—real, natural, good daylight—glinted off the gigantic crystals surrounding Bon Bon and Aldrovanda and sank deep into the glassy floor, losing itself in the stone’s blue depths. Lyra and the two other enchanted unicorns were nearby, standing still and silent as statues beneath the opening to the surface and waiting for the escaped prisoners to arrive. The two Shee were crouching just out of sight behind a small ridge, and Bon Bon was trying to be as quiet as possible in order to keep their presence unknown.

Aldrovanda, on the other hoof, did not appear to have gotten the memo about stealth being necessary. Receiving no response, she poked the changeling in the ribs with a thin, Glamour-shrouded hoof—Bon Bon wasn’t sure, but considering how bulky Aldrovanda’s real, pebble-covered hooves were, she suspected that the “hoof” the disguised kelpie had just nudged her with was actually an outgrowth of the kelpie’s knee,

likely shod with a rock, with the real hoof tucked up against her side—and repeated in a hoarse whisper, “Bon Bon!”

Well, if she wouldn’t go away and she wouldn’t be silenced, humoring her was probably the only option anyway. “What?”

The kelpie gestured in the general direction of the beguiled unicorns, hidden from view beyond the stone ridge. “Far be it from me to dictate to you, O queen of strategists, but—”

“I can’t stop Lyra and the other two for long, and if the alicorn and unicorn don’t escape, we’ll be trapped in here forever. I’m waiting for them to show.”

“Ah.” The kelpie, apparently nonplussed by Bon Bon’s abruptness, lapsed into a silence that lasted all of four seconds. Then something seemed to occur to her, and she nudged the changeling in the side again.

“Bon Bon.”

Bon Bon gritted her teeth and hissed, “*What?*”

“I’m bored.”

Sun and Moon. “How can you possibly be bored? You’re an ambush predator! The vast majority of your life has been spent sitting around and waiting for things to happen!”

“I never claimed to be a *good* ambush predator.” Aldrovanda raised her current hippopotamus-like head and sniffed. “At any rate, there are things to do in a swamp. Oozy things to step on. Rotting things to eat. Hopping things to squish.”

“Just be quiet and wait.” Bon Bon started to turn away from the kelpie, stopped, and then sighed and massaged her forehead. “Okay, I wasn’t going to ask, but I can’t help it.” She gestured vaguely in the kelpie’s direction. “Why in the name of sanity are you in that ridiculous shape?”

Aldrovanda preened. “Do you like it? I’m thinking of calling this persona either ‘Rambo Studchunks’ or ‘Beefy McMacho.’ Ooh, or maybe ‘Snowflake.’ I needed something to cover up all the junk that is *very temporarily* encumbering me, so I went with this. I would have gone with fat instead of muscle, but that’s just depressing, not funny. This, though, is hilarious.” She gave a self-satisfied smirk. “Do you know, looking like this gives me the oddest urge to attend pony sporting events and be absurdly

overenthusiastic? I bet they wouldn't even realize that I'm poking fun at them. The only real problem is my eyes; they're hardly standard issue, you know."

"I've heard that some ponies make little glass lenses you can put in your eyes to improve vision; they aren't really comfortable and you can't wear them for more than a few hours, but I guess you could use that to make your eyes look more like a pony's eyes." Bon Bon blinked. "Oh Celestia, I just enabled you, didn't I? You try something like that, and I'll be following you every inch of the way to make sure you don't eat anypony."

Beefy McMacho, or possibly Snowflake, bent down in a mocking bow. "I shall look forward to your company."

Bon Bon snorted, and turned her attention back to Lyra and the other two unicorns, still standing at silent attention beneath the opening to the surface. This was taking longer than she had thought it would. Surely the prisoners hadn't found some other exit? It wouldn't necessarily be *bad* if they had, of course, but it did change things. Or what if— Oh no. The buggane was still loose; suppose it had...

Bah. This was hunting trouble; no matter what had or hadn't happened to the escaped alicorn and unicorn, there was nothing she could possibly do about it, and "Rambo Studchunks" certainly couldn't be trusted to go check. No, all there was to do was to wait; wait, and hope—

"Bon Bon?"

The changeling's shoulders sagged. Wait and hope that the wretched kelpie didn't start talking again. Fat chance. "What now?" she whispered.

The kelpie formerly known as Aldrovanda didn't respond at first, scraping her hoof in uncertain semicircles on the cave floor; then, in a hesitant murmur, she said, "You don't *really* think that the Shee are...well, not-immortal, do you? I mean, really now. Even for you, surely that's crossing some lines that ought not to be crossed?"

"Oh, not this again. Look, believe whatever you want to believe, I don't really care—"

"I shall, thank you very much. Of course I shall. Of course." The kelpie averted her eyes. "But what do *you* believe?"

Bon Bon raised an eyebrow. "Why should you care?"

“I don’t. Of course not. But humor me, nonetheless. I find myself, ah, idly curious about the depths of depravity that your peculiar little thoughts have plumbed. It is a macabre fascination of mine. Quite unhealthy, no doubt, but there it is.”

The changeling considered the creature at her side, her tiny wings clasped tight against her flanks, absurd legs curled beneath her body, and head curled to one side, studying a rather unremarkable pebble with more keenness than it deserved. At length, she whispered, “I don’t know about kelpies, but yes, I think changelings are mortal. It’s too easy to lose oneself in Faerie, too easy to spend ten years there and find that five hundred or a thousand have passed in the outside world. Our race is confused and scattered across time, and the only one who could ever possibly know a changeling’s true age is that changeling herself. And then when you consider the ‘ponies’ who show up at our hives, unable to transform but with all the knowledge of the Unseelie Court that a true changeling would be expected to have—yes, Aldrovanda, I do think I’m mortal. I think all changelings are, and we’ve been pretending otherwise for eons, and killing or exiling anyone who saw through the lies.”

The Glamour-cloaked Shee digested this for a bit, and then plaintively whispered—almost squeaked—“But I don’t *want* to die!”

Bon Bon shrugged. “I never said you would. That’s something you have to figure out for yourself. Now be quiet, I think I hear something.”

It was faint, but there was a sound echoing through the caverns that was distinct from the ever-present dripping of water and tapping of knockers: the sound of hooves beating against rock, and perhaps the sound of voices, as well. To judge from their reactions, the three enchanted bridesmaids had heard something as well; in near-perfect synchrony their heads snapped upright, witchlight gleaming in their eyes. Lyra, Bon Bon thought, moved a little slower than the other two, but perhaps that was just wishful thinking on her part.

Well. Time for the final act, then. Bon Bon knelt, closed her eyes, and concentrated. She didn’t have much strength left, but she had strength enough for this. A faint green glow began to shine out from her forehead, filtering through her mane and flickering like a kindling flame.

Deep within the labyrinth of the Canterlot caves, Princess Mi Amore Cadenza stood with her head pressed flat against a crystal wall, straining to hear the distant sounds reverberating through the rock. Her senses, sharper than those of a normal, mortal pony, could detect the muffled echoes of goings-on all over the Canterhorn, conducted from vast distances through the solid stone. There was the deep, creaking groan of the towering bulk of the mountain twisting and bending ever-so-slightly in the winds that whipped about it—there was the confused and muted roar of a thousand pony hooves, trotting up and down the cobblestone streets of Canterlot—and there, faint but still horribly distinct, was the sound of a wedding ceremony being conducted in one of the upper halls of the Solar Chapel. *Her* wedding ceremony, stolen from her by the same creature that had stolen her face, her body, her life—and that would soon steal her husband. She raised her head, looking hopelessly up towards the rocky ceiling above, and groaned in frustration.

“We’re never going to save him!”

Twilight Sparkle looked back over her shoulder and smiled encouragement. “We will. We just have to find...” Her voice trailed off as she raised her head again, scanning the cave around her. The crystal walls here were strangely reflective, and she was having some trouble picking out the real exit from among the multitude of false reflections. That one, though...yes. That was it. “There!”

A starburst of fuchsia magic surrounded both unicorn and alicorn—Twilight was far more practiced at magic than Bon Bon had ever been—and the pair blinked out of existence. A moment later they reappeared almost directly beneath the cavern exit, blinking in the daylight shining down through the crevice overhead. This was it! They had done it! They were going to—

The trio of enchanted bridesmaids trotted forward, their eyes burning with livid green light. They smiled grimly and chorused, “You’re not going anywhere.”

The little unicorn stepped forward, her horn already sparking with a powerful spell, but Cadence raised a hoof to hold her back. “Twilight, no! The queen’s enchantment will make them kill themselves if we force our way past.”

Twilight’s head whipped around to look at her companion. “What!? Then what can we—YAAah!” She leapt back in surprise. A vivid green flash flared forth in the chamber as a crackling web of magic blasted out from a nearby cluster of crystals, slamming into the

three bridesmaids and sending them skidding off to the left in a confused tangle. What looked like a pale, tattered unicorn mare, her mane bedraggled and her horn still glimmering with green foxfire, stumbled out from her hiding place, panting heavily. She raised a weary head towards the two astonished escapees, and snarled, “Tell no one and nopony I was here. You overpowered the bridesmaids and escaped on your own, got it?”

Cadence stammered, “But I—what—who—how?”

“How?” Bon Bon swished her tail in exasperation. “Sun and Moon, I don’t care how! They’re bridesmaids, for Celestia’s sake. You can say you distracted them by tossing a bouquet at them, for all I care. Just one question. Can either of you lift the Glamour that’s been laid on them? It’s strong, fueled by stolen love and built by the changeling queen.”

The two ponies stared blankly at her, and Twilight said, “...Glamour?”

Well, it hadn’t been much of a hope anyway. “Right, never mind. Just go! Hurry! You don’t have much time to stop the queen.”

Princess Cadence stared in bemusement at the strange mare, and then spread her wings in preparation for flight and beckoned to Twilight to hop on her back, apparently content to not look a gift horse—so to speak—in the mouth. Twilight, however, hesitated. She seemed to find something about Bon Bon’s appearance confusing. The changeling raised an eyebrow and snapped, “Well? Are you going or aren’t you?”

“I’m going, but...don’t I know you? You look really familiar.”

Bon Bon stared at the unicorn for a moment, and then slapped her forehead with her hoof. “Oh no...Right, of course, you’re Twilight Sparkle from the Ponyville library. Princess Celestia’s protégée. Fantastic.” She lowered her hoof. “Yes, you do know me. I’m Bon Bon, I make sweets, I live with Lyra the lyre player, yes that’s Lyra over there, no I don’t usually have a horn, please don’t ask any questions. Neither of us has time for it.” She directed a sharp stare at Twilight. “Do we, now?”

The unicorn mare stood irresolute for a moment, and then shook her head. “No, I guess we don’t.” She hurried to the alicorn’s side, and scrambled awkwardly on to her back. As the two of them rose slowly into the air, the alicorn straining to lift their combined weight, Twilight called, “If you can, come by the library! I have some questions I want to ask you!”

Bon Bon gave a small smile but said nothing as she watched as the two ponies rise up through the vertical shaft to the outside world. When she was certain that the alicorn would be able to bear the burden and that they really had escaped, she turned and scrambled over to Lyra and the other two unicorns. Please, please let her be okay—the spell blast mixed with a little bewildering Glamour was all she had been able to think of, and she had tried to make it as gentle as she could, but that had been a hard fall and there were sharp rocks everywhere and what if Lyra had really been hurt and...

Her pace slowed. Thank Celestia, she could see Lyra's sides moving. She was breathing. They were all breathing.

And stirring, too, as a matter of fact. Hm. Chrysalis' power was fighting off the effects of her own Glamour even faster than she had expected. The unicorns' eyes snapped open, and in a flurry of limbs they righted themselves, horns sparking. Lyra turned to face Bon Bon with an expression that was a disturbing mix of fury, relief, and fear. "We didn't get them, Oh thank Celestia, wait, is that a *horn*—*Where are they what did you do with*—Bon Bon, get out, I don't know what I'll do, I don't know what *they'll* do—*They can't escape no one escapes they will rot where are they where are they!?*"

The changeling skittered back, hooves clattering on the stone, as the enchanted unicorns advanced. "Lyra, I can't just leave!"

"It's not—*where are they*—safe, Bon Bon, run—*Where are they!*—Run!—*WHERE ARE THEY!?*"

"Lyra, please! It's over! They escaped! They're outside the caves, there's no chance of stopping them now!"

The three unicorns paused, staring fixedly at Bon Bon. She remained as she was, limbs frozen in place and breath coming in short, shallow gulps. The Glamour in their eyes flared, and then, as one, their heads swung around to look up at the rift in the cave ceiling.

The light-bodied, pink-maned unicorn Bon Bon had impersonated in Canterlot—Twinkleshine, if she remembered correctly—intoned, "Their hoofprints end below the light, and there are wingmarks in the silt."

The second unicorn, a blue mare with a short, rough mane, said, "Their magic cannot be felt within the caves."

And then Lyra, her face expressionless but her voice thrumming with suppressed relief, said, “They are gone.”

They stood like that, limbs held unnaturally straight and heads held unnaturally high, for a moment longer, and then with the suddenness of a candle being snuffed the twisting, writhing Glamour in their eyes guttered and died. Their eyes rolled back in their heads, every muscle in their limbs and bodies slackened as if a thousand tiny marionette strings had been cut, and their limp bodies collapsed to the cold cave floor, tumbling and sprawling over one another like dolls abandoned by a capricious foal.

Bon Bon’s ears flattened in fear. “Lyra!” Her hooves kicked against the crystal floor as she darted over to her marefriend’s side and gingerly lifted her up. The unicorn was breathing shallowly, if at all. No, no—please, Celestia, no... She bent her ear to her marefriend’s chest, listening.

Hoofsteps sounded behind her, and the absurd Glamour-crafted head of Rambo McMacho—or rather, Rambo Studchunks—peered over Bon Bon’s shoulder. In a tone of polite interest, the kelpie inquired, “Is she dead?”

Bon Bon listened, and waited—and waited, and listened—and then her face wrinkled into an exhausted smile, her eyes scrunching shut as tears welled up within them. “Oh, thank Celestia.” She clutched Lyra’s body to her own, feeling the warmth of her marefriend’s body and the slight movement of her lungs as the unicorn began to breathe again. “She’s alive.”

The thing called Snowflake eyed the two of them, her head cocked to one side, and then asked, “Why does it matter?”

To her own very great surprise, Bon Bon managed to resist the urge to throttle the kelpie. “I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“Well, I didn’t mean it like *that*.” Aldrovanda ambled around the two mares and back into the changeling’s field of vision. Staring at the unconscious unicorn nervously, as if she had only just noticed some strange and unnerving quality in her appearance, the kelpie continued, “She’s just going to die in two years. ...Or wait, would that be two hundred? I never can remember how long the little vermin live. At any rate, though, what’s the point? Sooner or later, she’ll die. Why is a life like that worth anything at all? What does one *do* with a mortal life?”

And now they were back to the death thing again. Save the world, rescue her true love, and provide psychotherapy to a kelpie. One of these, thought Bon Bon, was not like the others. “You live. You learn.” She stroked Lyra’s mane with her hoof. “You love. And eventually you die.”

“How inspirational.” Licking her lips hesitantly, Aldrovanda said, “But how do they *stand* it? The fear, I mean? Why don’t they all just collapse into mewling puddles of despair whenever they remember what’s waiting for them?”

Bon Bon rolled her eyes. “It’s easier after the first few dozen fits of existential dread. You get numb to the idea.”

“Ah. I see. Numb. Yes.” The kelpie considered this. “Purely as a matter of curiosity, about how long does it take for this numbness to set in? How many minutes are we talking, here?”

“I don’t know, it varies. Probably a couple of million. Did you say something?”

In a voice that was several registers above even her usual screech, Aldrovanda answered, “I just said ‘gleep!’ I felt like saying it. Sometimes I feel like saying things. This time I felt like saying ‘gleep!’ Several *million?*”

“That adds up to a few years, right? I’m probably low-balling it, come to think of it. Some ponies prefer to just go into denial.”

“That’s an option?” The kelpie twitched her ears up in interest. “Why didn’t you say so? That’s not hard at all. Anyone can do denial. Yes indeed.” She paused for a few moments, considering, and then in a reflective tone she repeated, “Anyone can do denial.”

“Mm. Go check the others.” There was no disgust or annoyance in Bon Bon’s voice, which was a shame, because it felt somehow wrong to be talking to the Shee without simultaneously wanting to kill her. Somehow, though, as she cradled Lyra in her hooves, alive and whole, the changeling found that she just couldn’t seem to muster up any bitterness right now.

The kelpie trotted over to one of the other ponies, sniffed, and said, “Alive and fast asleep. Insert witticism here.”

Bon Bon blinked. “What?”

“Oh come now, you can’t expect me to come up with glittering repartee without pause. Even the best and brightest must needs rest their rapier tongues every now and again. Oh, and this one’s alive too, and just as unconscious.” She chuckled. “That idiot changeling. All power, and no subtlety. Hardly the sort of thing one hopes for from a queen of the Shee.”

Somewhat reluctantly, Bon Bon tore her gaze away from Lyra, and turned to look at the kelpie, who had just noticed that a pebble had gotten glued to her tail tip and was trying to bite through the hairs attached to it. “What do you mean?”

Sharp teeth slid together with a snap, and the offending hairs and pebble were removed. Rambo Studchunks craned her head over her shoulder, trying to see if she had picked up anything else. “Well, it’s obvious what happened, yes? Her Scrawniness gave them all manner of instructions what to do while her prisoners were *in* the caves, but she never bothered to give them any rules for what to do if the prisoners ever got out.” She gestured to the comatose pony by her side. “The Glamour tried to deal with that, and wasn’t even able to *comprehend* it, metaphorically speaking. And then *schlaact!*” The kelpie made a noise rather like a cat trying to regurgitate a hairball, which was presumably supposed to be an onomatopoeia of some sort. “The spell popped like a rotting frog in the sun—and since it was locked into their juicy little pony brains, down they went too. Tragically, I doubt there’s much that can be done about it. They’ll just stay like this until something eats them or they die of thirst—and if it should come to that, by the by, I vote the first option; it’s both far more merciful and far tastier. No, there’s not much hope left.” Laying peculiar stress on her words, the kelpie added, “Why, it would take a miracle to save them now.”

Bon Bon said nothing, her head bent over Lyra and her brow creased in thought. Beefy McMacho waited a few moments, and then repeated, “I said, it would take a miracle to save them now. As in, a nice, impressive miracle should probably be the next order of business.”

No response.

Snowflake, *née* Beefy McMacho, *née* Rambo Studchunks, *née* Utricularia the shellycoat, *née* Aldrovanda the kelpie, frowned. “That was a conversational nicety which I believe is referred to as a ‘hint,’ but you appear not to have gotten my drift. Allow me to continue snowing. The laws of physics, reality, and sanity are in your way, and I want you to vanquish them.” She lowered herself down to the damp cave floor, reclining catlike—or pot-bellied pig-like, considering her current shape—with her forehooves crossed, and continued, “Vanquish them so I can watch.”

Bon Bon glanced up at the kelpie. “Sorry, I have a strict ‘One Miracle per Day’ policy.”

“Ah.” The Kelpie of Too Many Names considered this. “So should I come back tomorrow, then?”

“Not if you’re hoping for a miracle.” Bon Bon’s gaze drifted back down to Lyra. The unicorn’s tousled mane hung stiffly over her horn and half-covered her eyes. She looked so peaceful now, so calm. The changeling smiled a strange, bittersweet smile. “No more miracles for me. It’s over, kelpie. The alicorn and Sparkle will warn the Princesses, and against them—well, Chrysalis doesn’t stand a chance. The entire invasion should be over in a few hours, and then it’ll be safe to come out and get help. Perhaps the alicorn imprisoned here couldn’t do anything, but I can’t imagine that the Princesses won’t be able to cure them. I’ll wait a bit, grow wings—I’ve got enough strength for that, at least, thanks to Lyra—find Princess Luna, ask her for help—”

“Is that not a bit redundant?”

Bon Bon tilted her head in puzzlement. “I don’t follow.”

“Well, it’s your business, of course.” The Shee gave an enormous yawn, triangular lizard-like teeth gleaming in her cavernous mouth. She smacked her lips several times, eyes half-lidded, and grinned. “But quite frankly, I do not see the logic in telling this Luna to come down here when I’ve already done so myself, as per your instructions.”

Bon Bon blinked several times in rapid succession. “What are—I don’t—Oh, for goodness’ sake. Look, kelpie, at this point I honestly don’t care much if you lie to me or not, but I would at least like for the lies to *make sense*. Just—tell me what you’re trying to manipulate me into doing. It’ll be easier for both of us, believe me.”

“Lie? *Me?*” The kelpie’s head snapped upright, goatish eyes wide in innocent surprise. “The soul of honesty? The *ne plus ultra* of sincerity? My dear Bon Bon, you wrong me.” She raised herself to her hooves with a grunt and stretched. “Naturally I told the moon pony that you were down here. I may not be the brightest Shee in the world—although I probably *am*, mind you—but if not I hope, at least, that I’m intelligent enough to follow simple instructions.” Snowflake, possibly, gestured vaguely towards the floor of the cave. “I imagine the princess is down in the darksome deeps right now, still searching away for you and your—” Bon Bon directed a cockatrice glare at the kelpie, and she faltered and finished, somewhat lamely, with, “Er, that is to say, for the both of you.”

“Right, sure, of course. And I imagine you also told her that the pink alicorn was really a changeling?”

With an apologetic shrug and a wistful sigh, the bulky white not-pony said, “Sadly, no. As I said, I can easily follow simple instructions like ‘Tell the moon pony I’m under Canterlot and need rescuing,’ but regrettably ‘Tell the moon pony I’m under Canterlot and need rescuing, and *also* tell her that some individual or other is really Chrysalis,’ qualified as complex instructions and thus was beyond my poor capabilities. Rest assured, though, I did tell her that you were in need of aid and succor. I told her like the *dickens*. You would have been proud of how thoroughly I told her. And since you seem, inexplicably, inclined to distrust me, I see no other option but to back up my statements...”

The kelpie paused theatrically. Her short, crew cut mane lengthened, falling in dripping waves of waterwheel, bladderwort, and pondweed over her suddenly bony body. Her white coat blackened and shrunk, and her bulging muscles turned into branches, fractured sheets of glass, sodden upholstery, an empty turtle shell, and a saddlebag. False legs shrank back into her body and true, pebble-coated legs unfolded, and as her tail flowed out to its old length, she curled it forward, holding its tip in front of her face. Dangling from a few of the longest threads of hair—or perhaps waterweed, it was nearly impossible to tell—was a hollow glass globe. Aldrovanda grinned a toothy grin, and finished, “...With proof.”

With whip-crack suddenness, the kelpie swung her long tail downwards, smacking the tip against the damp floor. The tiny sphere shattered with a pure, anechoic tone. Shards of curved glass skittered away across the rock, and Bon Bon knelt to examine one that had come to rest near one of her forehooves. It had been etched with a thin, curving line, rather like the crescent of a new moon.

There was the sound of hoofsteps, and the changeling raised her head to see that Aldrovanda had trotted over to the edge of the platform upon which they were standing, and was squinting down into the darkness below. She turned to look at Bon Bon. “There, see? She’s coming already. You were right about her mane, you know. Remarkably like the night sky.”

Now thoroughly confused, Bon Bon stepped hesitantly to the brink of the pit, careful to keep a few yards between herself and the kelpie in case this was some sort of bizarre ploy to push her off the edge. “Aldrovanda, I don’t see anythi...” She trailed off. Reflected in her eyes was the light of distant, impossible stars, shining up from the cavernous blackness below.

In a voice oozing with more smug satisfaction than should have been physically possible, Aldrovanda said, “I do believe a certain changeling owes a certain kelpie an apology.”

Still staring at the approaching patch of starlight, Bon Bon stammered, “But you betrayed me! You said you told Chrysalis—but you told Princess Luna too—and—Oh my head.”

Hooves wrapped in stone clinked against the cave floor as Aldrovanda turned and sauntered away from the precipice, the detritus clinging to her body swaying and rattling around her. “I admit, I did intend to betray your treason to your queen and leave it at that.” She hoisted herself up on top of the crystal ridge that she and Bon Bon had concealed themselves behind earlier, and turned to look back at the changeling. Her goatish eyes gleamed. “But then, repulsive and abhorrent as you are—no offense intended, of course, I merely mention it—I can’t say that I admire the Unseelie Court much more. They’re just so *demanding*. ‘Be more ferocious, Aldrovanda.’ ‘Report on the changeling, Aldrovanda.’ ‘Don’t be so lazy, Aldrovanda.’ ‘Don’t eat the crown prince, Aldrovanda.’ It’s always wearied me, and I couldn’t resist getting a little of my own back and spoiling at least some of their plans. Ignoble of me, no doubt.”

With a clattering thud, the kelpie dropped out of view, and there was the sound of receding hoofsteps as she trotted off into the shadows. Faintly, Bon Bon heard her call back, “But what can I say? You just made treachery look so *fun*.”

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Princess Luna arrived shortly afterwards, sweeping up out of the abyss in a rush of shadows, starlight, and majesty. Bon Bon, who was still feeling the effects of Aldrovanda’s company, found it a little difficult to explain things to the alicorn, but eventually she managed to communicate the fact that Yes, she was “the Fae who spoke to us near a se’night past,” and that an alicorn princess had been imprisoned, but had escaped not long before Luna herself had arrived. Luna took this in fairly composedly—although upon hearing that the alicorn at Canterlot was an imposter, her wings did twitch briefly, as if she were about to take flight—and after looking at the sleeping Twinkleshine nearby and casting a stern glance in Bon Bon’s direction, the princess set her horn aglow and began to work at the fragmented Glamour hobbling their minds.

It was a tense time for Bon Bon. Quite apart from Luna’s habit of muttering unnerving observations to herself while she worked (“A curious charm, this.” “A pox upon it, that was not supposed to happen.” “I don’t believe I have ever seen the likes of this magic before.”), the changeling’s peace of mind was not helped by some of the extremely pointed questions that the princess directed at the ponies as they recovered. Lyra, who

she revived first, she seemed content not to question too closely, although Bon Bon noticed that princess kept an ear half-turned towards her and her marefriend while she cured the other two ponies. She seemed particularly interested in a portion of their conversation that followed almost immediately after the two ponies had gotten past the first few moments of crying and comforting. Lyra had wiped her eyes on Bon Bon's mane (and her nose, a little bit, but considering things the changeling didn't really mind), drawn back from their embrace, and looked her marefriend up and down. Then, in a voice that was just a little bit too jaunty, she said, "So! You have a horn, now."

This was not going to be fun. Bon Bon sighed. "Yes. Yes, I do." This was not going to be fun in so very, very many ways.

After waiting for something more and receiving nothing, Lyra prompted, "And, uh, what's up with that?" Bon Bon opened her mouth, closed it, and then averted her eyes, her face pinched and her ears flattened in shame. She had known she would have to have this talk; why couldn't that foreknowledge have made this any less horrible?

Several seconds passed.

Lyra's forced smile faded. "No. Just no. Bon Bon, this isn't the same thing as you having weird fits every so often, your voice changing all the time, or being allergic to weird things. *You have a horn in the middle of your forehead.* Listen, Bonnie, I love you, but that kinda needs an explanation." She held up a hoof as Bon Bon started to speak, and continued, "I know, I know, 'Once we're out of the cave.' But we're pretty durn near to 'Out of the cave' right now, aren't we? Hay, we've got *Princess Luna* here. I can't imagine that you telling me what's up with—with *everything* would cause any kind of real trouble, but if it did, I bet you bits to baklava that Her Royal Highness would be able to handle it."

She was right, of course. She was completely right. It was safe now. No matter how Lyra reacted to the truth, Princess Luna would make sure that she stayed safe. In that light, there was no reason not to tell Lyra everything now.

Bon Bon raised her head, meeting Lyra's stern gaze. In a low voice that, thankfully, didn't have even the slightest hint of a comical accent, she said, "Alright. But I just—Lyra, you're right. This isn't some little mistake I made, or some weird disease I'm ashamed of, or something like that. This is *big*, and if I tell you, you'll—it's going to change everything, for you, for me, for us. I just think maybe it might be better if there weren't—if we're alone when I tell you." She drew a deep breath, and continued unsteadily, "But if you want, I'll tell you now. It's your choice."

There was a long, heavy silence, burdened with thought. Luna now had both ears twisted back in their direction, and looked like she was having trouble resisting the urge to turn her head, as well. Twinkleshine, who had just been dispelled and had gotten over her initial panic attack, was frankly gawking. Lyra may have noticed this, because eventually she nodded and said, “Okay, I’ll wait.” When Bon Bon tried to apologize the pale green mare shushed her and dragged the topic of discussion to lighter matters, evidently unwilling to talk about the subject weighing heaviest on both their minds.

Not long after in objective time and an agonizing eternity later in Bon Bon and Lyra time, Princess Luna stepped back from the last unicorn (“Colgate,” apparently), finally freed of Chrysalis’ Glamour, and announced, “I would that I could linger to aid you, but Canterlot is in peril and the time for me to act may come at any moment. The way to the city is not rough. I counsel you, though, not to hurry thither too swiftly; it may well be unsafe. Keep out of the line of sight, and all should be well. Now, come ye to me, and I shall loft you to the surface, and then make my farewells.”

No sooner said than done. Even with the prospect of her impending heart-to-heart with Lyra, Bon Bon had no desire to spend any more time belowground, and the others were even more eager to be on the surface again. Colgate stepped forward, and the princess’ horn glowed as the unicorn rose up through the rocky fissure to the surface. Twinkleshine stepped forward, and she too was lifted above. Bon Bon stepped forward—but Luna motioned her back, and pointed at Lyra. The unicorn glanced at Bon Bon, who gave a small smile and nodded, and then Lyra stepped forward, and she too was carried up out of the caves after the others. Bon Bon watched her until she passed from sight, and then turned to look up at Princess Luna, standing tall and regal in the dark. With an air of resignation, the changeling said, “Well, Your Highness?”

“I would speak with you, spirit, concerning your...friend.” Luna paused for a moment at the last word, and it occurred to Bon Bon that a mare falling in love with another mare was probably one of those things that Just Wasn’t Done a thousand years ago.

Hoping fervently that this wasn’t the prelude to a righteous smiting, Bon Bon prompted, “Yes?”

Fortunately, smiting did not appear to be on the princess’ mind. “She is fond of you, I deem, and unless I much miss my mark, you are deeply fond of her. I confess I do not quite understand this, but my sister assures me that in these times—” She halted, evidently feeling that she had gone a little off track, and continued, “Well, that is no matter. You love one another. This is so?”

Simple question, simple answer. “Yes.”

“I see. Then I have but one further question for you. I observe that, just as you were not entirely honest with me during our recent meeting, *changeling*—Aye, it is clear enough, thy disguise is too masterful for you to be of any other clan—you have likewise not been honest with her. This must not continue.” Her eyes narrowed. “Have I your word you will tell her what you are?”

At first Bon Bon did not respond. Then she raised her head, stared fiercely up into the alicorn’s eyes, and replied in a voice strong and steady as a mountain’s roots, “She has my word.”

Luna held Bon Bon’s gaze for a long, long moment, considering the little changeling with stern eyes and an unreadable face. Then the princess’ expression abruptly softened into a gentle smile. “That is sufficient for me.” She gave a short, whinnying laugh, genuine but tinged with the memory of an old sadness. “When all is said and done, who am I to pass judgment on thee—on you? My life has not been without its own darkneses, and be you never so wicked, you would have to work long and hard to match my own sins. Yet even I was forgiven, when forgiveness I sought. Meet it is that you be given the same chance.”

“Thank you, princess.” Bon Bon looked away, her ears lowered. “I can’t expect forgiveness, though, and I don’t dare ask for it.”

“I see.” The light of the distant Sun gleamed in the Moon Princess’ eyes as she raised her head, looking up through the long, twisting shaft to the outer world. She glanced back down at Bon Bon, and smiled. “But perhaps you will find it, nonetheless. I did.”

Soft blue light gleamed on crystal facets and shone on the damp stone floor as a swirl of magic crept up Princess Luna’s horn. “It is time both of us were away, I deem. My part in the defense of Canterlot is not yet come. ‘Tia—That is, my sister, Princess Celestia—insists that certain projects of hers be granted a chance to shine ere I step forth, and I—well, she has a strong will.” Her mane swirled in the air like a cloud caught in a gale as she shook her head. “But that is no concern of thine. Suffice it that I may well be needed shortly. Now, to the surface with you.”

The light of the princess’ horn flared out, and Bon Bon felt rippling waves of magic wrap themselves around her, lightening her weight. As she drifted up into the air, rising past the rough, moss and lichen-draped walls of the shaft towards the light above, Luna called up after her, “Farewell, ‘spirit,’ and again, I thank you for your warning. Quiet and hidden your service to Equestria may have been, but without it we would have been

caught completely unawares, and this day might have been fell indeed. Your deeds will not be forgotten.”

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A cold upland wind rushed and whispered through the tall grass of a steep mountain meadow, and gently shook the mint-green mane of a small unicorn, sitting on her haunches in the shadow of a small rocky outcropping and gazing out over the wind-whipped field at the shining white city of Canterlot beyond. The great force field that had protected it earlier was gone, and she could just make out innumerable black specks in the distance, some swarming through the air above the city like biting flies and others crawling, tick-like, over its gleaming marble masonry. Twinkleshine and Colgate had taken one look at the scene and had hurried back into the deeper shadows, huddling near the muddy, sloping pit in the cave’s floor that led in to the deeper and greater caverns beneath the Canterhorn, but Lyra had chosen to stay and watch. Whatever was happening here was big, and it was too important to miss. Moreover, after all that time spent struggling against the dark of the caverns and the dark of her half-slaved mind, she desperately needed fresh air, light, and wind—even if, apparently, they came with a side of apocalypse.

There was a muted commotion back in the shadows of the cave, and Lyra turned, her face lighting up as she saw the cause of the noise.

“Bon Bon!” Rocks and loose bits of sod tumbled down around the green unicorn as she clambered to the floor of the little cave and trotted over to her marefriend, who was currently struggling to her hooves after having been dumped unceremoniously on the cave floor by Luna’s magic. Lyra hoisted her up, brushed her off, leaned back and inspected her for cuts and scrapes, and then gave her a quick hug. Then, turning to the other two unicorns, she jerked a hoof towards the weedy entrance to the little cave and snapped, “Right, you two. Out. My marefriend-who-is-suddenly-a-unicorn and I need to have a talk.”

Colgate lashed her tail in irritation and observed, not unreasonably, that there was some kind of war going on out there and if Lyra wanted privacy she could get it the hay outside the cave, thank you very much. Twinkleshine, showing an admirable economy of words, expressed the same sentiment by simply raising an eyebrow, opening her mouth wide as a bullfrog’s, and saying, “Whaaaat?” Then, apparently feeling that she had stumbled on a really pithy phrase and it would be a shame to let it go to waste, she repeated, “No, but seriously, *whaaaat?*”

For a moment Lyra looked as though she might argue the point, but then she rolled her eyes and motioned her marefriend to follow her outside. The nimble unicorn hopped and scabbled her way up and out of grassy, overgrown hole leading to the outside world, then turned and lowered a hoof for Bon Bon to grab. The changeling drew a deep breath, exhaled, and then hooked her hoof around Lyra's and allowed herself to be pulled up into the daylight. It was time.

They stood together for a moment looking out at the black swarms buzzing around the towers of Canterlot. Then Lyra sighed, gave a "Yeah, but what can we do about it?" shrug, and turned to Bon Bon. "Look, Bonnie, I know that—"

It was at this moment that Twinkleshine, or possibly Colgate, chose to shout, "Hey! Crazy! Princess Luna wants to talk to your marefriend!"

Bon Bon felt an immense wave of relief, and then felt immensely ashamed of herself for feeling relieved, while Lyra pursed her lips together and very pointedly did not say several extremely uncomplimentary things about the two unicorns in the cave. The green unicorn glanced at Bon Bon, who smiled sheepishly and called, "Tell her we're out he— Oh, hello, Your Highness."

With a quick shake of her head, Princess Luna dislodged a stray piece of sod from her black tiara, and hoisted herself the rest of the way out of the cave. She nodded greetings to both mares. "Forgive my interruption. My errand, though twofold, is simple, and I shall not tarry long. First"—she walked several paces down the hill, and spread her wings, facing Canterlot—"come ye and stand behind me." Seeing their hesitation, she added, "Quickly, now! If I sense truly, time is short."

With some hesitation, Bon Bon and Lyra trotted back behind Luna and then stood there, feeling rather foolish. Several seconds passed. Grasshoppers droned in the sun-warmed grass and a meadowlark sang, while in the distance the changeling swarm continued its assault on Canterlot as Luna watched with remarkable impassivity. Several more seconds passed...

And then, quite without warning of any kind, Canterlot exploded. A piercingly, painfully bright white light shone from somewhere in the middle of the great city, and then a magenta wave of seething, glowing energy rushed outward, sweeping soundlessly through turrets, parapets, walls, and towers without having any apparent effect on them. At first, indeed, Bon Bon thought that, spectacular as the explosion had been, it had done nothing at all—and then she noticed the thousands of tiny black specks, flailing helplessly as the turbulent flood of magic swept them away from the city. Luna's eyes

narrowed and she braced herself, spreading her wings wide and setting her horn aglow with magic. The blast front plunged towards them, now half a mile distant, now a furlong, now a hundred yards—and then there was a bone-shaking crack and roar as the shockwave struck them, parting around Princess Luna and flowing harmlessly by them like whitewater split by a great boulder amidst the rapids. For a moment all was light and fury, and then the worst of it had passed them by, and even the roar of raw magic rushing through the air was dwindling away into nothing. The echo of the blast sounded off the nearby mountains, reverberating and re-reverberating, and with ponderous grace and majesty the rolling thunder slowly faded away.

And every last changeling but one on the Canterhorn had been swept away, never to return.

With a sigh of relief, Luna folded her wings. “My sister planned truly after all—though her methods, I cannot quite—well.” She turned to face the two mares.

Lyra spluttered, “Wait, so—that’s it? It’s over? But how—what—”

The princess inclined her head. “Indeed, it is all over. No changeling, or at least no changeling who was caught in that great magic,” she cast a swift, significant glance at Bon Bon, “remains in Canterlot, or on the Canterhorn. Equestria is safe.”

“But wait, hold on.” Lyra plunked herself down on her haunches and gestured with a hoof. “There were hundreds of them there. Thousands! And they were just sent packing, just like that? All that power, all that evil?”

“Aye!” She nodded. “The Fae are truly evil beings, and that evil is a clinging, choking thing, not easily banished. But there are some forces that may drive it out, whether wedded to magic, in this case, or merely standing on their own. Love, for example.” The princess smiled at some secret joke of her own. “Indeed, I suspect that was responsible in this case. Perhaps in others, as well.” Thankfully, she didn’t send any more significant glances in Bon Bon’s direction, which was just as well, as the little changeling was almost beginning to wish that she *had* been carried away by the spell. Moving with slow, deliberate steps, Princess Luna walked over to the shadowed entrance to the caves. “It would seem I am in no great hurry, after all. Nonetheless, I know you have much to discuss, and so I will be brief with regard to the *second* errand I have with you.”

Her horn glowed a vivid ultramarine. At first nothing appeared to happen, but then there came the sound of some squawking, struggling thing, somewhere in the deeps. There was a sudden scream from the two unicorns still within the cave—Luna rolled her eyes—and

then a white, heavily muscled thing vaguely resembling a pegasus emerged from the hole before her, struggling and complaining in the grasp of the princess' magic. Luna cast a dismissive glance at it, and turned to Bon Bon. "Is this yours?"

Aldrovanda, who was currently floating upside down in midair, craned her thick neck back until she could see Bon Bon and said in a gruff, grating voice, "Hay. Name's Snowflake, pretty mare. I work out." The kelpie raised a forehoof and pumped it. "YEAAAAH!"

There was a moment of total silence.

Bon Bon heaved the sigh of a changeling who had both borne the weight of the world on her shoulders and had had it talk sass to her, and said in a dull, flat voice, "Honestly? 'Rambo Studchunks' fits you better."

"Do you really think so?" Tombstone teeth shrank into gleaming reptilian fangs, a white coat blackened and bulged into an impossibly diverse array of junk and detritus, "Snowflake's" short mane and tail flopped out into a kelpie's long, green, dripping tresses, and Aldrovanda's goatlike eyes gleamed mischievously. "I confess the name does appeal to me, but I thought it might be a tad much. Snowflake has such a delicious sense of incongruity to it, don't you agree?"

"Sure. Why not." With a quick gesture of her hoof, Bon Bon beckoned to Lyra, who was inching backwards with her eyes fixed on the scabrous, dripping thing held in Luna's magic. "It's okay, you don't have to worry. She's kind of harmless. Um."

For some inexplicable reason, this did not seem to reassure Lyra all that much. In an appalled whisper, she gasped, "What is that?"

"Ooh, introductions!" Aldrovanda beamed toothily. "You're Lyra, of course, and you're not Bon Bon's pet. Delighted to make your acquaintance; you appear to be, ah..." She paused, apparently struggling to come up with something complimentary, and then concluded, "Meaty. You look commendably meaty. Yes."

"Um. Thank you." Making a valiant effort to salvage some semblance of normal social interaction from the conversation, Lyra responded, "You look, uh, meaty too, I guess."

The kelpie raised an eyebrow. "There's no call to be insulting."

"But you just—"

With a magnanimous wave of her hoof, Aldrovanda said, “Don’t worry, I forgive you. I’m sure it would break Bon Bon’s sweet, pure little heart to have us squabbling; she’s dull like that. But,” she added, “I could be wrong. She’s certainly flouting convention now by leaving my identity unknown to you. Introductions, Bon Bon, introductions!”

Lyra looked at her marefriend helplessly. “Bon Bon?”

Bon Bon clapped a hoof over her face. “Celestia and Lun—Oh, I’m so sorry, Your Highness, I didn’t mean—it just slipped out—”

With a stern face and twinkling eyes, Luna said, “Nay, do not apologize. No offense is taken. I believe you were about to explain this—creature to your friend?”

If Bon Bon hadn’t known better, she would have sworn that Luna was actually finding this amusing. With a sigh, she muttered, “Lyra, this is Aldrovanda. She’s a kind of, uh, fairy called a kel—”

The bedraggled Shee gesticulated wildly. “Eh eh eh eh eh!”

“What?” Bon Bon stared blankly at the kelpie for a moment, and then rolled her eyes. “Of course. How silly of me. Lyra, apparently this is ‘Utricularia,’ the shellyco—”

“Neeeh!”

Whisking around to face Aldrovanda and stamping her hoof on the ground, the changeling demanded, “Well, what *do* you want me to say you are?”

The kelpie gestured with a forehoof. “Say that thing you said few days back. That incredibly complimentary thing. I want to make a good first impression.”

Bon Bon blinked, and then said in a flat voice, “I have never said anything complimentary about you in my entire life.”

Raising a hoof in front of her face, Aldrovanda tilted herself over towards Luna and said, “I swear, memory like a stickleback.” It was a possible that she thought she was whispering, but if so she was mistaken. To Bon Bon, she said, “Sure you have! Don’t you remember? It was the morning after I impersonated your definitely-not-a-pet, here. You said I was an ‘unholy abomination and...?’”

She smiled expectantly. Bon Bon buried her face in her hooves. Lyra said, “Wait, what was that about impersonating me?”

“Oh yes, that was a fun night. After she impersonated you, Lyra, I tried to kill her and then she broke down our bathroom door. That’s the bathroom doorknob hanging from her ear, incidentally. Everyone—everypony—Oh hang it, *everyone* involved had the time of their lives.” After a few deep, calming breaths, which were frankly not nearly as calming as she had hoped they would be, the changeling continued, “And right. Of course. How could I forget. Lyra, this is Aldrovanda. She is an unholy abomination and an affront to reality itself.”

“That’s not a figure of speech, by the way,” chirped Aldrovanda. “The universe really does despise me. You are now looking at a literal Thing That Should Not Be. Go on. Drink it in!”

Raising an eyebrow, the changeling said, “So you’ve actually accepted it, then? Huh. Will wonders never cease.”

“‘Accepted it?’ Accepted what? Much as I appreciate your companionship, I do wish you would at least try to keep the driveling to a minim—” Aldrovanda halted mid-sentence, eyes widening in horror as she realized the implications of what she had just said. For a moment she said nothing, and then hurriedly added, “When I said I was literally an abomination, I meant, ah, figuratively literally, of course. I mean, it’s not like I’m *really* going to d—the Shee aren’t mort—I can’t—I’m not—” She trailed off, clutching her limbs protectively around her cluttered, angular body like a dying insect, and in a defeated little murmur said, “I’m not fooling anyone, am I?”

“No.” Bon Bon shook her head. “Not even yourself, anymore.”

Glass, stone, and wood rasped and scraped against one another as the kelpie pulled her legs a bit tighter around her body. “I won’t say it, though. I don’t have to say it, you can’t make me say it, and I’ll never ever want to say it, so if you think for a *moment* that—”

“Yes, fine, whatever.” Massaging her forehead with a crooked hoof, Bon Bon said, “You don’t have to say anything.”

“Good.” Aldrovanda hunched her shoulders, peering over her crossed forelimbs at the little changeling. “Just so we’re clear on that.”

At this point Lyra, who had been listening in helpless confusion to this exchange, nudged Bon Bon and in a doubtful tone said, “You’re sure she’s not dangerous, Bonnie? She seems kind of unstable.”

“Yes, well. Honestly, she is kind of unstable.”

The magic web holding the kelpie aloft momentarily brightened, and Luna said, “You need have no fear. She shall not break free.” Turning to Bon Bon, the princess said, “I will be brief. This creature has, I gather, done you great wrong, for reasons that are not clear to me. She—”

Aldrovanda, who appeared to have been trying to brood—or possibly even introspect—raised her head with an indignant squawk. “Great wrong!? I have been like a mentor to her! I tolerated her weird perversions, gave her sage advice, regaled her with humorous and instructive anecdmmMMMphle Mppph!” A magical aura shone around Aldrovanda’s head and a little brass zipper slid across her mouth, fastening it shut. After a few more attempts at speech the kelpie made a muffled noise of indignation and lapsed into silence, her forehooves crossed pettishly. The glow of magic around Princess Luna’s horn dimmed.

Bon Bon was filled with a feeling of great peace.

Princess Luna swished her tail irritably—a bizarre sight, as her diaphanous, drifting tail was not entirely physical, and appeared to flow rather than swish. For a moment, Bon Bon had the strangest impression that some of the star-like specks of light in the alicorn’s tail had gleamed blue as they shifted towards her, and red as they drew away—and said, “As I was saying, I bade this creature summon me immediately once she found you or anypony else in need of aid, but I gather that she did not do so, endangering you in the process—and treating me as little better than a dog, to be called or held at bay as she willed.” Glancing back at the kelpie in disdain, Luna continued, “I sensed her in the caves, and after bearing you to safety, I retrieved her—”

“Ffffnmmumhmm!” said Aldrovanda, scowling.

“—retrieved her,” continued Luna demurely, “with the intent of making her answer for her transgressions.” Lowering herself to the verge, Luna glanced back at the kelpie, who had managed to flip herself around so that her back was to the three of them and was trying mightily to twist around again so that she could see what was happening. The princess shook her head, and returned her attention to Bon Bon. “She requested, however, that *you* be the one to pass judgment upon her—and considering that it is you who have been wronged most by her actions, upon reflection I saw no reason to gainsay that request. So.” Luna drew her head back, considering Bon Bon through half-lidded eyes. “What shall her fate be?”

Somewhat hesitantly, Bon Bon stepped forward, looking up at the squirming kelpie. With an awkward twist and wriggle the creature writhed upside down, allowing her to

look at Bon Bon as well. Aldrovanda's eyebrows danced erratically, in what was presumably an attempt to convey some sort of message.

In a low, pensive tone, Bon Bon said, "You. You've caused me so much trouble, you know? Every step of the way, you've been trying to stop me, doing everything you could possibly think of to make sure that I didn't get to Lyra. Lying, stealing, delaying, betraying, insulting, mocking. On and on and on, and no matter what, I just couldn't shake you. You just wouldn't go." She paused. "And now here you are, and here I am—and what will become of us, you and I?"

"MpphmMMphle," said Aldrovanda, and somehow managed to smirk ingratiatingly despite the zipper across her mouth. There was no response from the changeling other than a long, steady stare, and Aldrovanda's smirk slowly faded as Bon Bon, her face blank and unreadable, considered the creature that had caused her so much aggravation and misery.

Then the changeling heaved a heavy sigh. "But on the other hoof, without you, Luna would never have come to the caverns, and Lyra and the other two would still be enchanted. Without you, I would have given up, there in the deeps."

"Mpmm, mhphm mmpf."

Bon Bon shook her head. "Sorry to disappoint, but no, I really would have. And come to think of it, without the lies you told Chrysalis about me murdering you, she would have just done away with me then and there, instead of choosing a longer, slower way that gave Lyra and me a chance. Hay, without you I never would have known about the invasion in the first place. Without you, Chrysalis might have *won*."

In an extremely emphatic tone the kelpie said, "MffffFnphphle," paused for a moment, and then added hopefully, "Mph?"

Rubbing her forehead with her hoof, Bon Bon said, "Oh, fine, I guess so." With a glance up at Luna, she said, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but...set her free. We're even, as far as I'm concerned."

The princess shrugged. "On thy head be it."

The magic swirling around the kelpie dissolved into the air and she tumbled down to the ground with a rush and ruckus. There was a small pop of inrushing air as the zipper across her mouth vanished, and Aldrovanda snapped, "Really, Bon Bon, that took far too

long. I had hoped that you would arrive at the right decision with a bit more promptitude.”

“Ungrateful creature,” muttered Luna, rising to her hooves. She turned to Bon Bon and Lyra. “Well. I shall retrieve Colgate and Twinkleshine, and we shall all away. No doubt you have much to discuss with one another.” With a gesture towards Aldrovanda, she added, “Shall I remove this, as well?”

“I have hooves,” squawked the kelpie, her voice rattling with indignation. “I can walk!”

“As you will.” The princess nodded farewell to them, trotted up to the entrance to the caves, and edged her way inside. There was a brief sound of muffled conversation, and then the grass stems and brush overhanging the cave’s mouth were momentarily backlit by a burst of bright blue light, accompanied by the distinctive ringing hiss of a teleportation spell.

Aldrovanda watched this with interest, and then turned to Lyra and Bon Bon, a broad, toothy grin plastered across her face. She looked like a jovial crocodile. “Well, then. The happy ending, I gather, with the ‘Oh my loves’ and the ‘dearests’ and the swooning and the *blech*.” With a toss of a knobbed, junk-garnished tail, she trotted up and around to the top of the overhang shadowing the cave entrance, looking down on the two of them with that same sly smile. “I will say this, Bon Bon, and I’ll say it willingly, although I may have to eat soapwort to get the taste out of my mouth afterwards. This end? You’ve earned it. It’s been fun. I’ll be back.” She gave a long, low bow, and then slunk out of view behind the waving stalks of timothy-grass, heath lobelia, and stunted heather.

Lyra turned to Bon Bon, but the changeling raised a hoof and said, “Wait for it...”

Sure enough, within a few seconds Aldrovanda’s cluttered head popped back into view. She gave a brief nod to Bon Bon, and then, addressing Lyra, said, “Three things. First, that business with the giant walking gramarye was a good start. Try for something bigger and more smash-y next time. Second, ask Bon Bon to show you her balancing act some time. It’s a *gem*. Third, I’ll probably be dropping by your lair in the future—I wish to consult Bon Bon on the subject of existential dread—and I’ll want food. Now, normally I think you ponies have all the culinary talent of a stump full of dead snails, but I was in Canterlot recently and I discovered a remarkable delicacy called ‘Mr. Frisky’s Cat Nibbles’ which has made me revise my earlier opinions. The stuff is *amazing*. As good hosts, I shall expect you to have plenty in stock when I drop by. Right, I think that’s it. Toodles.” She flashed another grin, and then, with a rustle of grass and a rattle and clatter, she was gone.

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It was cold, and the high mountain winds were blowing. Tattered fragments of clouds, tumbling and swirling in misty disarray, drifted among the meadow grasses or rushed in silent violence against the unyielding bulk of the Canterhorn itself. Canterlot shone pure and perfect and golden in the distance, only partially obscured by the shifting mists. There would be bells ringing there, the sounds of celebration and happiness, joy and relief—but from where they stood, neither Bon Bon nor Lyra could hear them. They were alone.

And it was cold.

Lyra broke the silence first. Drawing a deep breath, she said, “I didn’t realize. I thought you had just—I don’t know, somehow gotten trapped or tricked by those things, or something like that, but that creature, that kelpie—you knew her. I mean, you *understood* her. You understood her even better than Luna did. I didn’t think—I didn’t understand—I didn’t realize how *big* this might be. You tried to tell me, but I just didn’t get it.”

Averting her eyes, Bon Bon said, “I didn’t try very hard. But then, you know that now.”

“Yeah.” Lyra considered. “Well, I guess now’s the time, now or never. I don’t—I’m not even sure if I want to know what the answer to this is, anymore, but I have to ask it anyway.”

“And I need to answer it.”

“Yeah.” Kneeling and angling her head upward in an attempt to look into the changeling’s downcast eyes, Lyra asked, “Bon Bon...*what are you?*”

Bon Bon took a few faltering steps backwards, edging towards the squat black maw of the cave. “A lot of things, but probably the most important one is that I’m a liar. I’ve lied to the world, lied to myself, and worst, lied to you. That ends now.” She felt tears welling up in her eyes, blinked fiercely, and continued, “But there’s one thing you need to know before I say any more, one thing that was always true, no matter what else may have been a lie. Lyra, I always loved you, I love you now, and I always will love you, no matter what. That’s the single, real truth that everything else was built around. You were *always* loved. Never doubt that.”

Lyra gave a weak, worried smile. “I don’t, Bon Bon. I never did.”

“I know.” The changeling sighed, and closed her eyes. “But the thing that loved you, well—”

A venomous, writhing warmth flared behind Bon Bon’s eyelids, and dancing green flames flickered over the surface of her lenses, scorching away everything that was sane and normal about them. She slowly slid her eyelids open again, revealing the glassy, electric blue compound eyes of a changeling, and finished, “It wasn’t quite what it claimed that it was.”

Lyra’s eyes widened in shock, and Bon Bon rushed on, hurrying to say what needed to be said while she could still bear to say it. “I’m a changeling, Lyra; the same kind of monster that Queen Chrysalis is, and although I’m not strong enough now to transform all the way, if I could I’d look sort of like her, fangs and wings and all. My real name is Mendax; it’s an old name, from back when Discord first ruled. Roughly translated, it means ‘Liar.’ Appropriate, I guess, because ‘Bon Bon’ was just a pony I made up. The reason she never had much to say about her past was because she never had much of a past to talk about.”

“But I’ve known you for years! How could—how—I don’t...” Lyra’s voice shook like a moth trapped in a spider’s web, shaking and shivering against a fate that it knew it couldn’t escape.

Bon Bon hung her head. “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I wish I hadn’t—I wish, I wish, I wish, what’s the point of that? But it’s true. My voice shifts all over the place because I’m a changeling, and I’m not very good at keeping the shape of my throat constant. I can’t stand horseshoes because I’m a changeling, and iron burns changelings—just like the iron poker burned the buggane, back in the caves. Midsummer and midwinter, Imbolg and Lughnasadh, Beltane and Samhain—they’re all hard times for me because I’m a changeling. It’s on those days that Faerie’s strongest, and that I can hear the horns of the Wild Hunt in the sky. I can see and hear it all—because I’m a changeling. Every day of my life I’ve had to fight to stay here with you, in the real world, and not get sucked back into Faerie.” With a sigh, she added, “And some days were harder than others.”

The wind swept past them, cold and high and dry, rushing through their manes and tails and sending the long hairs billowing around their stiff bodies—Bon Bon hunched and guilt-stricken, and Lyra still as a midwinter tree, eyes wide and face drained of color. Raising a heavy hoof, the changeling turned towards the cave entrance. “There. That’s everything, I think. If I hadn’t lied to you for so long, and if I wasn’t what I was, none of this would have happened. I’m just—I’m so sorry.” Bon Bon trotted slowly towards the gaping hole in the ground. “Go back to the sunlight, and try to be happy. Try to forget

me. I'm not worth your love." There was a quiet clink of stones scraping against one another as she edged under the overhanging ledge of clay and thatch into the darkness.

"Wait."

Bon Bon looked back. "Lyra—"

"Wait." The pale green unicorn trotted forward, moving with halting, uncertain steps, and knelt on the pebbled moss in front of the cave. Raising herself halfway up out of the pit, Bon Bon rested her forehooves on the little grassy ledge and looked up into her marefriend's face. She noticed her own eyes reflected in Lyra's, glowing eerie blue against the unicorn's amber irises, and twitched her head away. She didn't want to see that glow. She didn't want to be reminded of—

"Just—before you go, could you—could you say something?"

"What?" She looked back at her marefriend. The unicorn's eyes were wide and her face was drained of color, but her ears were pitched forward, not flattened back in fear. Bon Bon stammered, "Lyra, I—I don't think I have anything else to say. I've broken everything. It's all just pieces now."

"But—" The unicorn took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Just say something. It doesn't matter what, it doesn't have to be serious or anything, and it doesn't have to be about us. It might be better if it wasn't, actually. Just talk. I need to hear you talk."

"Well...okay." Bon Bon lowered her eyes, thinking. "Um. I'm sort of cold, I suppose. The sky is, uh, a pretty color now, very blue, and—Sun and Moon, I completely forgot. I got some blue paint and sandpaper for the cellar door, to fix that awful scratch in it. But I was in such a hurry to get back home that it got left behind. Now I suppose you'll have to get some yourself, since I won't be—I'm not—Oh Lyra, I can't *do* this—"

"Please." Her marefriend's eyes were still closed, her head bent forward and her horn almost touching Bon Bon's forehead. "Sandpaper and blue paint is good. Keep talking about that, like none of this had happened." When the changeling hesitated, she added, "*Please*, Bon Bon."

"Right." With a sigh, the blue-eyed creature continued, "It was lapis lazuli paint. You'll need to get that; otherwise it won't match the door properly. And I don't know if I locked the front door when I left, so you'll need to make sure that nothing's missing—"

"You locked it," murmured Lyra. "You always do."

With a wan smile, Bon Bon answered, "I suppose I do. But all the same, you should check, just to make sure." She paused, thinking. "Also, I never got the mess from the broken bathroom door cleaned up. I really should have. There was a little time before the train for Canterlot arrived, and it wouldn't have taken long. Oh dear, and that door won't be cheap to replace, either. I've got a stash of bits that you can use to pay for it, though. It's in a little bag in the kitchen closet, behind—"

"—behind the mop, underneath a pile of rags," finished Lyra.

Bon Bon raised her head, surprised. "That's right. I was saving it up so I could buy you a watchmaker's lathe. You're always complaining about how the one you have is no good for machining really fine pieces, and I knew you'd need to make a lot of tiny parts for your portable Fing-er. I thought it'd make a good anniversary present. How did you know about that?"

"I do sometimes clean around the house, you know."

"When I tell you to." The small smile on the changeling's face faded. "When I told you to. When—when—" The words caught in her throat as the full weight of what she'd lost crashed back down on her. She couldn't drag this out any longer. She couldn't bear to.

Choking out a strangled "Sorry," the miserable mare started to lower herself into the cave, but stopped at the touch of Lyra's hoof on her shoulder. She looked up. The unicorn was gazing into Bon Bon's upturned eyes, a strange expression on her face. In a barely audible voice, she murmured, "Housecleaning and lathes..."

Then, to Bon Bon's utter stupefaction, her marefriend hooked her hooves under the changeling's forelimbs, hoisted her halfway out of the cave, and folded her in a tight embrace, nickering reassuringly into her tousled mane. Bon Bon whinnied in shock.

"Hush. Hush, Bonnie, hush. It's okay." Lyra gave another soft nicker. "I don't know, but I think it's all gonna be okay."

Without quite meaning to, Bon Bon raised her forehooves and wrapped them around her marefriend, clinging to her like a frightened foal. "But—I don't understand, how can you—I'm a monster. I'm not what you thought I was."

"Maybe not—but you are *who* I thought you were." With a gentle nudge of her hoof, Lyra raised Bon Bon's head up so that the changeling's blue, crystalline eyes met her amber ones. "You know something? When I was first getting to know you it wasn't your fits, or your weird thing about horseshoes, or all the rest that was hardest for me."

She gave a crooked half-smile. “It was your voice. It was always changing, always different. Sure, it was silly, but I felt like *you* were always changing, too—like I’d start to get to understand you, and then your voice would shift and you’d suddenly just disappear, and there’d be this strange pony at my side who I’d never met before. I didn’t know how to deal with it.” The tousle-maned unicorn pressed her forehead against Bon Bon’s. “I eventually figured out I was being stupid. It was always you, under the weird accents and jumping pitches. Always. It didn’t matter how you sounded, it mattered what you said, and what you said was always so *you*. And then, well, I started to fall in love with you—with the *real* you. Didn’t really mean to, but it happened, and I never regretted it for a second.”

Lyra leaned back, a hoof resting on the changeling’s shoulder, and continued, “And it’s *still* you in there. I can tell. What other pony would trek all the way from Ponyville to Canterlot, fighting bugganes and kelpies and I don’t know what else, and then start beating herself up for forgetting to make sure that the house was tidy before she left? What other pony, after saving Equestria, would worry about whether or not she’d locked the front door? What other pony would think that *metalworking tools*, of all things, would make a good anniversary present?”

With an uncertain, scared little smile, Bon Bon said, “Not a pony, remember? And that was kind of stupid of me, I should have gotten you something more romantic, that—”

“And what other pony,” interrupted Lyra, her voice strong and certain now, “would know me well enough to be *right*? I’m not giving you up, Bonnie. I couldn’t find somepony else like you—or “somechangeling,” if you like. Whatever—in a thousand years. It doesn’t matter what your voice is like, it doesn’t matter what your eyes are like, it doesn’t matter if you’ve got a horn, or wings, or are all black and scaly and your legs are poked full of holes. I know it’s still you, and I know you’re worth loving. If you think I’m going to let you crawl away into the dark and lose yourself, you’ve got another think coming. Ain’t happening, filly.”

The wind shifted, rushing down from the glittering golden towers of Canterlot and sweeping up to the two mares across the meadow, bringing with it the sound of bells and the scent of wildflowers. Lyra locked forehooves with Bon Bon and lifted her the rest of the way out of the cave mouth. “I can’t say that a little bit more honesty wouldn’t have been nice, but do you think I *hate* you for not telling me what you are? Do you think I hate you for being hurt and scared and exhausted? Bon Bon, I wouldn’t have left you. I would never have left you. I would have *helped* you.” Extending a hoof, she nudged the changeling’s chin up, letting sunlight fall on her bruised, dirty face. “We can make this work. It’s weird, and kinda freaky, but I think we can make it work.”

Bon Bon took a deep breath. The air was cold and fragrant with alpine flowers, but she could also smell Lyra's distinctive scent, familiar and alive with the smell of copper and rosin, oil and coffee. Reaching out, she drew Lyra into a tight embrace. "You might be right about that." A weak, happy smile crept across her face, and she raised a hoof, rubbing clumsily at her eyes. "I think you might just be right."

Steam piped and whistled from a stout copper teakettle, rising in eddying clouds through the warm, fragrant air. Two thick, round loaves of bread, fresh from the oven, lay on a scratched table pushed against the wall of the kitchen, and beside them on a wooden tray sat a small tub of butter; a tureen of hot carrot soup sprinkled with floating flecks of oregano; dried bananas; and fenugreek (Bon Bon wasn't fond of banana as a spice herself, but Lyra swore by it. It was possibly a pony thing); several clean, neatly folded napkins; assorted utensils; and a stack of carved bowls.

Bon Bon, her mane tied back with a kerchief and her flushed face dusted with a few patches of flour, surveyed the culinary still life before her with a satisfied smile on her face. The warmth, the smells, the gleam of her nice copper pots and pans and the wholesome realness of fresh baked bread... This? This was good.

Pale green hooves clattered against the tiled floor as Lyra trotted into the kitchen, her mane still dripping from the shower that Bon Bon had insisted that she take. Her eyes widened. "Dang, that smells good." She ambled across the room and draped herself over the changeling's back like a wet dishrag. Peering up at her marefriend, who was trying to be irritated at being used as a clotheshorse and failing spectacularly, the unicorn continued, "I mean, really good. What about you, though? You didn't make any broth for yourself?"

Bon Bon motioned at the steaming tureen. "I thought I should have some soup as well. We don't want to put Princess Celestia's apprentice on edge. There's a difference between knowing I don't need food and seeing that I don't need it, and it's probably best for me to not be too strange." Her voice dipped mid-sentence out of an Appleloosan twang into what she suspected was a Dunnish accent. "At least, as far as I can manage."

"You'll do fine. It looks awesome." She nuzzled the changeling's mane. "Love ya, Bonnie."

"I love you too, dear heart." Bon Bon smiled. This was best. "And thanks, I tried to get it looking nice. It's just a shame I have to ruin it."

"Ruin it? What do you—Oh." A knowing glance. "The chicken?"

"The chicken."

They both looked over towards the little windowed alcove where they usually ate, now dim and shadowed in the evening twilight. A squat, garish patchwork chicken was lolling

there atop a little two-pony table, surrounded by a tangle of sewing supplies and a half-empty bag of “Mr. Frisky’s Cat Nibbles.” Lyra set her horn aglow, and a golden aura materialized around one of the bulbous thing’s malformed legs and lofted it over to the tray, where the unicorn tucked it in between the butter and the soup tureen.

After they had considered the effect of the little tableau for a few moments, Bon Bon silently grabbed one of the napkins in her mouth and covered the prismatic abomination. Lyra nodded. “Good call. Sort of a shame she’s got to be here, but I guess Sparkle needs to know about the bad as well as the good. Don’t want her getting blindsided by it later. Should I take it in, then?”

“No, I’ve got it.” Biting down on the two long loops threaded through the tray’s edges, the changeling shook Lyra off her back (“I am not going to carry you around all night.” “Aww...”), heaved the tray up, and trotted out into their den, followed by her marefriend. Her eyes widened as she entered the room. Setting her burden down on an old folding table sitting in front of the hearth, she turned to Lyra and exclaimed, “Goodness, this is lovely!”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised,” grinned the unicorn. “Told ya I could manage fancy-schmancy. There’s a tablecloth and everything, and I used damp rags instead of newspaper around the bathtub.”

Bon Bon winced. The chicken, the bathtub...Well, not everything could be perfect. “Clean rags?”

“Cleanish.”

“That’s...probably good enough, actually. Now, here’s hoping that *she* gets here before Twilight Sparkle does, so that we can get—”

She was interrupted by a loud clanking, clattering thud from the front passage, as though somepony wearing a tin-can hauberk had thrown themselves bodily against the door. Bon Bon sighed. “Speak of the draconequus.”

Lyra’s brow furrowed. “What’s she trying to do, batter it down?”

“No, she just doesn’t understand—”

Another heavy, rattling blow from the front door.

“Sun and Moon...” The cream-colored mare trotted towards the anteroom. “There’s a *latch*, Aldrovanda! You push down on—”

Whatever else Bon Bon might have said was buried under a rush of thunks and crashes as the door swung open and a vaguely pony-shaped mound of detritus blundered in, tripping over the sill and sprawling across the floor in a tangled mass of limbs and refuse. Lyra trotted over and peered around her marefriend’s shoulder at the kelpie, who paused in her flailing to squint up at the two of them.

“*Doors*,” hissed Aldrovanda, her voice dripping with venom.

Bon Bon rolled her eyes. “You’ll get used to them eventually. I hope. We’ve got a tub of water set up for you, over there in the corner, and most of the things in the room aren’t edible, so *please* don’t try to eat anything just yet.” She started to turn away, but Lyra stopped her and whispered something in her ear. The changeling nodded. “Oh, that’s right. There is *still* nothing living inside the fireplace, so we’d really appreciate if you didn’t try to crawl up the chimney again.”

Settling Aldrovanda in was oddly catastrophe-free. There were a few slight hiccups, but as Lyra pointed out that one cushion had never been very comfortable anyway. Privately, Bon Bon felt that this docility on the kelpie’s part was more than a little suspicious, but unfortunately she wasn’t able to do anything particularly productive about those suspicions. Their ramshackle guest had scarcely scabbled into the bathtub, her eyes glittering darkly just above the water’s surface, when there came a hesitant tap at their door followed almost immediately by a firm tac-tac-tac.

Lyra gave a little “here goes nothing” shrug and trotted over to the anteroom, while her marefriend hung back a moment to cast a warning glare at Aldrovanda. The kelpie made no reply other than a toothy smirk. Bon Bon scowled, and then followed her marefriend to the door. Lyra gave her an encouraging nod, and after drawing a deep breath the little changeling pulled the door open.

“Hi! Hi. My name is Twilight Sp—RightYouKnewThatAlready.” The lavender unicorn standing on their doorstep flashed a smile that was just a little wider than it should have been, adjusted the saddlebag slung across her back, and then started guiltily at the dull clunk of metal against metal from within the cloth sack.

All three mares froze. After a moment Bon Bon sniffed at the air, and said in a quiet, even tone, “Mage Starswirl’s wort, too. You did do your research.”

“And iron,” hissed Lyra. She started to step forward, her eyes narrowed and ears flattened back against her skull, but stopped at the touch of Bon Bon’s hoof on her shoulder.

“It’s okay. I don’t blame her.”

“Yeah, well I bloody well blame her. You’re the only reason she ever got out of that cave, and that ungrateful—”

“It’s okay, sweetie. It’s okay. There are lots of nasty stories about the Shee, you know—and most of them are true. I’d want some defense too, in her place.” She smiled reassuringly at their guest.

“I’m sorry, I just—I wasn’t going to use it,” spluttered Twilight, her eyes darting from the changeling to the unicorn and back again. “It’s just—my books said—I—”

“Then what were you going to do with it?” demanded Lyra. “Listen, mare, you so much as touch a hair on her head, and I’ll take your eyelids, tie ‘em into a butterfly knot around that horn, and then take a big ‘ol bucket of brine and—”

Bon Bon frowned. “Lyra...”

“Seriously, though!” The unicorn gestured at the cringing mare standing in their doorway. “‘She wasn’t going to use it?’ Does she think you’re stupid?”

“No.” The changeling turned to look at Twilight, whose smile had now very emphatically left both “awkward” and “creepy” far behind and was beginning to make little exploratory twitches into “terrified.” “She thinks I’m *dangerous*. And we need to show her that she’s wrong. Come in, Miss Sparkle, and if it makes you feel safer, you can bring the faebane with you. Just keep the chase-disor—sorry, the Mage Starswirl’s wort away from the soup, if you can. It’d ruin the flavor.” She considered. “Oh, and it’s poisonous to me and Aldrovanda over there, even in small amounts, so there’s that too.” She gestured back to the bathtub in their den, currently filled with water, a kelpie, and approximately one shellycoat’s-worth of attached detritus. Aldrovanda waved a junk-encrusted hoof and grinned, giving Twilight an excellent view of her gleaming fangs.

The mare hesitated, peering past Lyra and Bon Bon at the darkling creature lounging within the house. For a moment it looked as though she might back away, but then she drew a deep breath, shrugged the saddlebag off her back, and stepped inside. “I guess if you can trust me enough to let me bring iron into your house, I can trust you enough to *not* bring it in. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Bon Bon.

“Hmph,” said Lyra.

“Now that she’s defenseless, can I eat her? I’m hungry,” said Aldrovanda.

• • •

Kelpie notwithstanding, the rest of the evening actually proceeded much more smoothly than might have been expected, given the rocky beginning. Following Aldrovanda’s little contribution to the conversation, Twilight had decided that on the whole she really would prefer to bring her saddlebag and its contents inside, thanks. She relaxed her death grip on it not long after they had all settled themselves down around the table, though, and within half an hour she seemed quite comfortable, slurping soup as she peppered her Seelie host with questions about the Shee, the Unseelie Court, and Tír na nÓg. Somewhat to her surprise, Bon Bon found herself incapable of answering many of them. Their guest seemed to have a peculiar knack for intuiting the most obscure, arcane question she could possibly ask about the world of the Fae, and then immediately developing an intense, burning need to have it answered to the very finest detail.

Still, she was at ease, and that was what mattered. Bon Bon had realized that after the events of the royal wedding, and the renewed interest in the Unseelie Court that it would no doubt bring, that it was really only a matter of time before somepony or other figured out what she was. Although having the Royal Sisters already aware of the situation was all well and good, she thought—and Lyra agreed—that having a more local ally would be no bad thing.

So far, the changeling was really quite impressed with their guest. She was plainly just a little unhinged—hardly surprising given her magical ability—but all in all she seemed to be handling everything very well. It helped, Bon Bon supposed, that Aldrovanda had removed herself from view early on, curling up underwater to gnaw on the cat food innards of her messily disemboweled stuffed chicken. Other than occasional sloshing noises emanating from the bathtub and the unpleasantly pungent aroma of a decaying grayling—or half of one, anyway—entrained in the drifting tangles of her lank, weedy mane, Aldrovanda might as well not have been there at all.

It helped even more, although neither changeling nor pony was aware of this, that between the two of them Lyra’s personality was far more volatile. When Bon Bon and Lyra had shown up at the Ponyville library one rainy afternoon, explained their situation to the shocked unicorn, and invited her over for a dinner where they could talk about it

more and assuage her worries, Twilight had suspected that she was dealing with another parasite, feeding on Lyra just like the changeling queen had fed on her own brother. Despite Princess Celestia's reassuring response to the quick letter she had dashed off, Twilight had arrived that evening half-expecting to see the same green, glowing Glamour-blight she had seen in Shining Armor glimmering out of Lyra's eyes.

Well. The unicorn mare was definitely protective of her marefriend, but it was obvious that there wasn't the faintest speck of Unseelie magic clouding her mind. Mindless thralls did not get into loud, good-natured shouting matches with kelpies, or immerse themselves in—Twilight wasn't sure what it was, actually... amateur clockwork hoof-spider making?—and derail perfectly enthralling conversations about facultative bipedalism in subadult púcas for half an hour for the sake of demonstrating their latest invention. Nor would one expect, after the invention had gotten loose and started scuttling around the room like a demented pocketwatch on legs, for a mind-slave to chase down said invention and beat it into submission with a dog-eared copy of *White Stockings' Guide to Proper Pony Punning*, bellowing “Death and artichokes!” and “By Celestia's Beard!” the while.

So both the parties of the first part and the party of the second part chatted and considered and explained and judged, and although Lyra didn't budge from the protective position she had taken between their guest and Bon Bon, and Twilight continued to cast occasional nervous glances towards the lurking kelpie, on the whole all of those present found themselves beginning to feel almost comfortable with—

And then there came a sudden string of harsh, staccato knocks at the door. All three mares started back. Bon Bon and Lyra edged closer together, Twilight laid a hoof on the saddlebag resting by her couch, and the two mares and their guest stared across the table at each other in strained, suspicious silence.

Water splashed behind them as Aldrovanda reared up out of her ersatz pond, her tattered mane scattering rank droplets on the rags around her bathtub as she cackled gleefully. “The pure, untarnished trust you all have for one another is positively heartwarming. It truly is.”

“Quiet,” hissed Bon Bon. “This isn't...” She trailed off.

“Yes?” The kelpie inclined her head politely. “Isn't what?”

The pale cream mare made no answer at first. Then, her voice grim despite its current high pitch, she turned to face the creature and demanded, “Who did you bring?”

“Who did I—you think *I* know? Honestly, my dear little race traitor, I haven’t a clue what you, or maybe your charming guest, here, have been doing behind each other’s backs. Perhaps it’s a pack of ponies—” She stopped, struck by the alliteration, and after a few moments of thought finished, “—porting pokers? Or a fleet of Fae, fanged and fierce? How could I possibly be expected to know?” She slid a slender tongue over her fangs. “Or wait, another thought occurs to me. I’m like that, you know, always thinking thoughts. You wouldn’t know what it’s like, I imagine, but—”

“Get on with it,” Bon Bon snapped. By this point Lyra and Twilight had turned too, staring at the smirking creature lounging in the corner.

“Fine, fine.” The kelpie rolled her goatish eyes. “I just thought that since you’re here, the pony who saw through your queen’s disguise is here, and the pony who was able to shake off your queen’s glamour and bring down a buggane is here...” Another toothy grin. “...Well, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if you three had earned yourself a visit from someone very important. *Royalty*, even, perhaps. I suppose it’s possible I may have hunted down a certain mutual acquaintance of ours and...made arrangements.”

“No,” whispered the changeling, her face white. “No! She was cast out!”

“She’s baaa-aaack!” warbled Aldrovanda in a lilting, singsong voice.

Another heavy blow struck the door, imperious and emphatic. Twilight clattered away from the table. “Back door? Is there a—”

“Nope.” Golden light swirled up Lyra’s horn as she drew a bent poker up from the hearth, her tail lashing back and forth. “You’d better get out that iron of yours, Spar—you brought a *spoon*?”

“Three, actually, but yes. It was all I could find on short notice.”

“It’s a spoon! What were you going to do, *scoop* your way to safety?”

“If it’s made of iron or it’s got iron in it, it’ll help,” interposed Bon Bon. A burst of green flame swirled around her legs, blackening her hooves and pitting them with sharp-edged cavities, and she slunk over to the side of the den and clambered up the wall, crawling in unsteady stealth across the wooden planks towards the space directly above the front door. Her marefriend followed below, creeping over to one side of the door with her poker poised at the ready. Looking back, she gestured for Twilight, who was currently gawking at the changeling crawling across the ceiling, to join them.

The being outside struck the door again. From behind them, Aldrovanda called, “Well, aren’t you going to answer it? This rudeness surprises me, Bon Bon. I thought you were more picky about that etiquette stuff.” The changeling scowled, then gestured to Twilight to lift the latch. She gave a little nod, took a deep breath, swung the door open—

—And dropped her spoon with a gasp, her eyes wide in shock. For a moment nopony said anything, and then Twilight stammered out, “*Princess Luna!*?”

The tall, graceful alicorn standing in the doorway, her dark mane swirling and glimmering around her, nodded assent. “Indeed.” She gazed down at the two ponies, Lyra with her poker still poised in mid-air and Twilight with her Spoon of Death, and her mouth twitched into a puzzled half-smile. “Had I known that a coup d’état was being planned for this evening, I believe I would have had my guards escort me to the door, rather than stay by the chariot. What means this?”

Celestia’s student stepped forward. “Princess, I—”

“Wait!” Lyra hoisted the poker up into a striking position, her ears still flattened back against her head and her teeth gritted. “Wait. Bon Bon?”

“No, it’s alright,” said a voice from somewhere over Luna’s head. The alicorn nearly brained herself on the lintel as she swung her head up to look at Bon Bon, clinging to the wall above the door like some surreal equine fly. “I don’t feel any Unseelie magic. It’s not Chrysalis. It’s Luna. She’s real.”

The princess raised an eyebrow. “I confess I am ignorant of many modern customs, but I do not recall my sister telling me that ambush was considered a proper mode of greeting. Is aught amiss?”

Scuttling down from the wall—or rather, scuttling halfway down and then losing her balance and flopping the rest of the way down like a Jacob’s Ladder—the changeling said, “No, but—I thought—we thought—” She paused, struggling to drag her thoughts and her mouth into roughly the same place. After a moment she scowled, and hissed, “*Kelpie.*”

Raising her head, the changeling glared across the room at Aldrovanda, who was leaning forward in her tub with her pebbly hooves resting on the rim and an enormous sharp-toothed grin plastered across her face. After emitting a sort of weak “hkk-kk-kk” noise the cluttered creature managed to gasp out “spoons,” and then collapsed forward, her

body shaking with laughter. Twilight scowled. Lyra made a small choking noise and covered her mouth with her hoof, trying not to smile.

“I take it she did *not* inform you that I wished to speak with you, then, and her naming of this date and time was done entirely without your consultation,” observed Luna, drily.

Bon Bon stomped over towards the bathtub. “No she did not, and yes it was. Aldrovanda! You wretched—horrible—you told us that you’d summoned *Chrysalis*! You scared us to death!”

“Chrysalis?” The kelpie lifted her head, her face a perfect picture of wide-eyed, innocent surprise. “*Chrysalis*? I merely suggested that your unexpected guest was both royal and recently returned from exile. And you thought I meant Chrysalis? What a peculiar notion.”

“You knew full what you were hinting at. Don’t think I’m going to—” She halted and looked back over her shoulder. “Oh, Lyra, sweetie, no! You know it’ll only encourage her.”

“I’m—pffchle!—sorry! I can’t—tchrk—I can’t help—pfff—I—PftcHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

The kelpie smirked.

For a moment Bon Bon just stared at the scabrous creature, rifling through her brain for possible responses. Then, without really meaning to, she slumped back on her hindquarters and began to laugh. Maybe it was relief. Maybe it was sympathy with Lyra. It was *not*, she told herself, because there was anything remotely funny about the situation, and she was going to wring that thing’s neck for putting them through that.

Just as soon as she was able to catch her breath.

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Somehow it all worked out. Halfway through her fit of laughter Bon Bon realized (A.) that Princess Luna, even if technically uninvited, was still their guest and (B.) that everypony else had soup and she didn’t, and scurried off to the kitchen to get another bowl. When she got back Lyra had calmed down a little but was still chortling, while Twilight had just remembered that Luna was likely to have word of Shining Armor and Cadence, and was peppering the alicorn with questions about the newlyweds. This was doubly fortunate in that it took Twilight’s mind off of spoon-based mockery and

prevented Luna from raining divine wrath on Aldrovanda. The kelpie herself was looking smug, not that that was exactly noteworthy.

It was odd, really. Every moment, Bon Bon expected the good mood to turn sour and for somepony, kelpie, or alicorn to step on another's hooves and send everything spiraling out of control, and yet it never quite happened. A nascent argument between Lyra and Twilight turned into a conversation about technomancy. Luna's chastisement of Aldrovanda became a Q&A session on the habits of the Shee, and any further problems that might have been caused by the antagonistic creature were forestalled when, after about half an hour, she drowsed off at the bottom of her tub. Lyra's mildly confrontational request that the princess explain how, exactly, things went so horribly wrong at the wedding ended up as a remarkably candid discussion of the royal sisters' plans to counter the invasion, and where they failed and succeeded. A non-smiting Luna, a no-longer-suspicious Twilight, an unconscious Aldrovanda, and a happy, contented Lyra...strange how sometimes, somehow, things really *did* turn out well.

The stars drifted along in the sky, clouds gathered and dissipated, and the night wore on. Eventually Twilight glanced up at the clock on the wall, started at the lateness of the hour, and said she'd better be off. At the door, she turned to Bon Bon (Lyra, having said a short farewell, was back in the den debating the merits of modern technology with the princess and trying to convince her that a difference engine, while much less portable than an abacus, was worth the trouble) and said, "I learned a lot tonight—about a lot of things. Would you and Lyra maybe like to come over for dinner sometime, at the library? Spike—he's my assistant, he's a dragon—I think he might like to talk to you. He's always had some trouble figuring out how to be a dragon in a town filled with ponies, and it might help if he could talk to somepony—Oh, sorry."

Bon Bon rolled her eyes and smiled. "Somepony' is fine."

"Right." The unicorn gave an awkward grin, and continued, "Somepony else who isn't—well, who isn't a pony."

"I'd have to ask Lyra, of course, but for my part, I'd be happy to. We'll let you know. Goodnight, Miss Sparkle. Thank you for giving Lyra and me a chance; not all ponies would have."

With a somewhat sheepish smile, the lavender unicorn waved goodbye and trotted out the door. Princess Luna rose to her hooves. "Meet it is that I too make my farewells. Ere I take my leave, though, there are yet some matters that I would discuss." She glanced over to the anteroom, where Twilight had stood a moment before. "*She* is not the only pony

who owes both of you her life, though she knows it not. If there is aught that I or my sister may do in thanks for—”

Bon Bon walked over, shaking her head. “Thank you, Your Highness, but I think we’re good.”

“Yeah,” added Lyra. “If you’d offered to shower us with wealth beyond our wildest dreams a few weeks ago, I’d ‘a told Bonnie here to let the nice alicorn dang well shower us with wealth beyond our wildest dreams, but...y’know, not so much, now. Only having to buy half as many groceries frees up a lot of bits, too.” The unicorn yawned. “Like she said, we’re good.”

With an odd little half-smile, the princess said, “As you wish it. I must insist, though, on one token of appreciation. Nay, do not thank me; it is no great thing. It is, indeed, merely a matter of returning to you that which was already yours.”

Cobalt-blue light swirled around the alicorn’s horn, and with an odd rushing rustle a bundle of fabric and straps unfolded itself out of nothingness in front of her, suspended in midair in a web of glittering magic. Her eyes wide, Lyra exclaimed. “My saddlebag!”

Luna nodded. “Indeed. It was found shortly after the invasion by one of the city guards, along with a most singular list. Upon hearing of its existence and deducing its likely owner I took it upon myself to seek it out, and then, well—” Luna set her horn glowing again. A discolored scrap of paper and quill pen flickered into being. “—I confess I indulged myself and ran a few errands. The fifth task on the list had already been completed satisfactorily, but as the other purchased items had been ruined by rain and mold, it seemed the least I could do was to replace them.”

Giving the brittle, tattered scrap of paper an officious little shake, the alicorn brought it up to reading distance and cleared her throat. There was an odd theatricality to the action, as if the simple act of reading from a list gave the princess a great deal of pride. It occurred to Bon Bon that, what with her royal status, Luna might not have ever had an opportunity or a reason to go shopping before. She remembered Nightmare Night, and was suddenly filled with deep sympathy for the merchants of Canterlot. Luna began reading.

“Item the first: Sandpaper, coarse grade. Aye.” The saddlebag shifted, and a rough sheet of sandpaper rose halfway out, its rim shining with deep blue magic. Luna scratched “sandpaper” off the list with her quill. “Item the second: Lapis lazuli paint. Aye.” *Scratch.*

“Item the third: Lyre strings. Aye. Item the fourth: Marsh mallow. Aye.” The quill dashed across the paper two more times, and then lay still. The princess looked up at Bon Bon.

“Item the fifth: Warn Captain of Guard of imminent changeling invasion, thus saving all of Equestria from certain doom.” Luna smiled and scratched the words from the list. Lowering her head, she bowed to the changeling. “Aye. All that, and a great deal more.”

The solemn silence that followed (or awkward silence, from Bon Bon’s perspective) lasted all of two seconds before Luna broke it by glancing back at the list and muttering, “Powdered sugar, aye, almonds, aye. ‘Faith, changeling, could you not have *concluded* your list with the world’s salvation? I possess, I hope, great personal dignity, but even I can do little with such an ending. Baking supplies make for a poor denouement.”

“Um, it was at the end originally, but then I remembered I wanted to try a marzipan recipe. I didn’t see a point in wasting the paper.”

“I suppose I cannot gainsay that.” The graceful star-maned creature gave her wings a shake. “Now, I must be off. My thanks to both of you for a most pleasant evening, an engrossing conversation, a fine dinner, and for saving the world.”

The two mares followed Luna into the anteroom, and Lyra pushed the door open. “Honestly, the whole saving-the-world bit was kind of an accident. Mostly Bon Bon and I were just trying to save each other.”

“May the stars have mercy on whatever poor creature next threatens one of you, then,” said Luna. She made as if to depart, but then stopped and turned back. In a hesitant voice, she continued, “There is one other matter, actually. Am I correct in understanding that you are not wed?”

Bon Bon blinked in surprise. “Um, no. That is, yes. That is—no, no we’re not married. I mean, I guess maybe we will, someday, but the subject hasn’t really—we haven’t talked all that much about—”

“Which is kinda weird, really,” interrupted Lyra. “You’d think we would have gotten around to that by now. Whaddya say, Bon Bon? Wanna get hitched?”

Bon Bon clapped a hoof over her face. “Lyra...”

“Alright, alright. I got it. You’re not ready yet.” She raised a hoof to one side of her face and whispered theatrically to Luna, “She’s not ready yet.”

“Well, now,” said the changeling, eyeing her marefriend, “I didn’t actually say *no*.”

Lyra’s ears perked up.

“I didn’t say yes, either. I just didn’t say no.”

Down went the ears again.

Luna, who had been watching this exchange with raised eyebrows and what might or might not have been a smile, said, “Well. In the happy event that such a proposal is accepted, I would like to make the two of you an offer. I confess that when first I learned of the nature of the bond between you, I did not understand that—I am from an older age, you must realize. I supposed that yours was, by definition, an entirely carnal—that there was no true depth of feeling—that—sinful—” She halted, brow furrowed, and gave a frustrated snort. “Enough. I was wrong, and my past errors are hardly relevant. I simply wish to tell you that, should you be in need of an elder to preside over your wedding, I would be honored if you would permit me to fulfill that role. Nay, I will not have thanks. Nay. A good night to you both.” She smiled. “I believe I can promise that your sleep will be sound, and your dreams wholesome.” With a long, low bow of farewell, the dark alicorn departed, spreading her wings as she left the door and leaping up into the clear, starry sky.

Warm, amber light flowed out of the open doorway, marking the outlines of Bon Bon and Lyra in sharp relief: Bon Bon, standing with her head raised and her gaze directed at the stars above, and Lyra sitting by the changeling’s side, her head resting against her marefriend’s shoulder. Perhaps a minute passed in silence. At length Lyra looked up.

“Hey, Bon Bon.”

“Mm?”

“So, why *didn’t* you say yes? Are you just not ready? Was I not sappy enough? Too sappy? You don’t accept proposals on Thursdays?”

The changeling peered down. “It’s Friday. And in what demented universe would ‘Whaddya say, Bon Bon? Wanna get hitched?’ be *too* sappy?”

“I dunno. Just throwing it out there.” The unicorn nuzzled her marefriend’s shoulder. “But seriously.”

With a chuckle, Bon Bon raised her head again, looking back up at the vast light-spangled arc of the Galaxy overhead. “For one thing, you did kind of put me on the spot. But to tell the truth—is this a serious ‘seriously,’ or a jokey ‘seriously?’”

“Serious ‘seriously.’”

“Hm.” After a moment, the changeling grinned, and said, “To hay with it. To tell the truth, if you asked me again now, I might just end up saying yes after all.”

Lyra pulled back, staring at her in surprise. “Wait, really?”

“Yes, really. The only thing holding me back, I think, would be one slight problem that needs to be fixed first.”

“Name it.”

The changeling raised a hoof and pointed back into the house at the bathtub where Aldrovanda was currently dozing. “I don’t accept proposals—or do anything remotely romantic—when there is even the slightest possibility that that ambulatory waterweed might show up and start snarking about it. Once she’s back in her swamp, *then* we can talk proposals and acceptances and engagements.”

“Is that all? Awesome!” Lyra rose to her hooves. Golden light spiraled along her horn, and the poker that had been left by the door rose up into the air beside her. “That’s my next thirty minutes taken care of, then.” She leaned in and gave Bon Bon a quick nuzzle. “Stay beautiful, filly. *To war!*”

The changeling mare watched as Lyra galloped inside, and then looked back up to the sky. She closed her eyes and shivered. There was an icy touch to the breeze blowing past that had nothing to do with cold. The sound of pipes drifted through the flowing air, whining and whistling melodies that no pony had ever heard, and that no pony ever would hear. For a moment Bon Bon glimpsed, or smelled, or heard, a great wolfish phantom, white-haired and lank-limbed, lumbering blindly and invisibly along a distant Ponyville byway that had been built atop a far older leyline.

A sigh. She would never be rid of Faerie, no matter what. Not without some effort, Bon Bon forced herself away from the cloying, venomous pull of the Otherworld and struggled back to reality. All her life she would be fighting this battle. All her life she would be struggling against Discord’s Curse, a single Seelie Shee standing at the brink of a vast, hungry elder world writhing with demons.

From somewhere back in the house Bon Bon heard a very large quantity of water moving very noisily, followed by the clang of metal striking stone and a hissed stream of insults in at least two different languages. There was a brief moment of silence, more invective and clanging, and then Lyra hollered, “Bonnie, could you come help me with this? She glued herself to the fireplace like last week! I think we’re gonna have to knock out another brick!”

Bon Bon rose, shaking her head with a smile on her face as she trotted back into their comfortable, safe little cottage. There was iron and faebane in the world, true, along with the ringing echo of the Wild Hunt’s horns, the cruelties and whims of the Unseelie Court, the insistent tug of Tír na nÓg, and of course the kvetching of a certain kelpie. But there was also the scent of bread, the shine of copper, the light touch of cotton, and the warmth of Lyra’s love. She faced a lifelong struggle, maybe—but it was worth it.