

Mendacity

by Dromicosuchus

Part VIII

“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 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 something as demanding as a teleportation 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 flittered 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 nopony...

...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? Somepony 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 Lyra's amber eyes, illuminated by the gentle golden glow of the unicorn's horn. She 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.*