

# Mendacity

by Dromicosuchus

## Part XI

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 bindle. 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. "Nevermind. 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 away—" 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.

-----