

# Mendacity

by Dromicosuchus

## Part VII

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.

---

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 Unseelie 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, “micht 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. Ye've 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. Ye be a changeling now, but once yer 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 yer friend, the fuath—or kelpie, as ye'd 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 yer own question, though it is an odd one, for I am as I am. Ye may 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 ye, 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 ye. Ah, weel.” He sighed. “Then unless ye ken the name Bugul Noz, there are mickle kindly ways that I may answer yer 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 ye 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 before 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 Sídh were nae 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? You rank 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 ye imagine me tae be is clearly very frightful tae ye, leanan sídhe—yet ye, 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, gross. 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 yer 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. Ye’ve 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 ye, I believe I would. I hae nae especial fondness for poor Tarakhe’s children, but ye strike me as a 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 pucás 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 ye; so very sorry. For a’ o’ ye. Tarakhe did indeed mak the Aes Sídh, during his first mad attempt to tak the cosmos for his ane, as a thoughtless joke. Ye were, am 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, craiteurs, an’ objects. A braw 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 sídh, doesnae like bein’ warped.”

The draconequis 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 Sídh; 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, ye ken: ‘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 taeg’e’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 ye be something of an exception tae the rule. “Come—Mendax, I believe yer friend said?”

“I prefer Bon Bon, actually.”

The draconequis nodded. “Bon Bon it is. Come, then, Bon Bon, an’ I will help ye 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, ye ken. 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 ye, weel..." The Bugul Noz paused, choosing his words. "This pony that ye seek tae rescue, there atop the mountain. Ye are fond o' her, aye? Weel, suppose that a stranger marched up tae ye, an' begged yer help, for he was in great distress. 'O' course,' ye tell him. 'I shall help in ony wa' that I can.' 'Weel then,' he says, pointin'

tae yer friend, ‘tae help me ye must tak a great stick, an’ soundly beat that pony wi’ it. Only then will I be happy.’ Ye wouldnae dae it. An’ just so, I will no’ twist reality’s arm tae save ye, 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 ye. 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 ye no’? But o’ course, I am forgetting; ye are a wee sma’ beastie, an’ dinnae cover quite so much ground as masel’. Step forward a few paces, an’ ye should 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 ye would react. If I may say so, ye showed 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, ye ken, 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 ye from using one o’ my paths—just this once. Yer 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, ye will 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 yer een for forty heartbeats, an’ when ye open yer een again ye will find yersel’ at the foot o’ my menhir. Ye will hae tae guide yersel’ 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.”

“Ye play 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. Yer friend needs ye.”

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.