Mendacity

by Dromicosuchus

Part IX

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't think I've ever heard of…"

"Oh, well, I've learned a lot in the past few days." *But not about knockers, which you've known about since your third instar, at least. You're lying to her. Why are you still doing that? Why can't you just be honest for once in your life? Horrible things have been happening to her, and she deserves to know who's really to blame for them. You promised her you'd explain things. "*They're a kind of…fairy, I guess you

could call them. They need magic to live, but they can't make it themselves, so they hunt out certain kinds of rock that make magic when struck, and hit them"

Lyra blinked. "You mean like a piezothaumic crystal?"

"Piezo…?"

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

"You wanted to hurt me," finished Bon Bon.

The unicorn made a small, scared sound. Bon Bon drew Lyra into a tight hug, holding her marefriend's shivering body to her own. "But you didn't. You didn't because you're strong, you understand? That *creature*—" she spat the word "—put you under the strongest spell that she could muster, but we broke through it, you and I. She couldn't beat us. It's not all over yet, but we a*re* going to beat her, no matter what. You are going to be free, free of all of this, and you will never have to

deal with this evil mess again. No matter what else may happen, I promise that."

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

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

They were white and curved in odd ways; funny, they looked almost like…

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

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

The changeling stood still for a long, silent moment, and then very slowly lowered her torch and picked her way towards the opposite side of the pit, trying

not to step on any bones. Or pebbles. Or the cave floor in general, actually. She glanced to the side, her ears plastered against the back of her head. The mouths of the burrows yawned tall and black around her. She raised a hoof and laid it gingerly on a massive slab of mica that had slid down the pit's slope, and winced at the faint crunching sound as she set her weight on the stone. A quick glance back. Nothing was stirring.

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

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

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

The light of Bon Bon's torch flickered beneath solemn flowstone towers, juddering along in waving fits and starts as the Shee crawled, ant-like, across the

surface of fallen crystal titans and up long, slanting slopes of loose detritus. Her eyes were on the steady, gleaming patch of daylight far above, but her mind was otherwise occupied, brooding on her last conversation with Lyra.

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

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

Liar.

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

No more selfishness, no more half-measures, no more lies. She would see Lyra to safety, beyond the caves of the Canterhorn and beyond the reach of Chrysalis and the Unseelie Court. She would tell Lyra the truth about herself. Then, rather than beg for forgiveness that she didn't deserve and that, she told herself, she had no

right to expect, she would take herself out of Lyra's life and crawl back into the wheedling miasma of Faerie, where she and everything like her belonged. Tír na nÓg would take her, and Lyra would finally be able to live free of the enchantments of the Shee.

A faint, poisonous green scent drifted up out of the cold stone, bringing with it echoing whispers and the hollow piping of bone flutes played by soft white paws. A drop of water, falling from some lone stalactite far above, sped by Bon Bon's face and then slowed to a standstill near her hocks. It hovered for a moment, then slammed itself down against the cave floor with impossible speed, scattering droplets that splashed and skipped across the stone surface in crazy, unwholesome patterns. Bon Bon hissed, snatched her torch up from the cave floor, and barked "Not yet! I'm not yours yet!"

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

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

smothered the others; the Glamour of Queen Chrysalis.

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

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

—And halted, so suddenly that she almost toppled over face first in to the pit gaping before her. She was back at the rim of the macabre bone-filled basin she had crossed earlier. Well, she had made it through once without any trouble, and there was no reason to expect the second time to be any different. As quickly as she dared, Bon Bon made her way down into the pit, and began picking her way across the uneven floor, trying not to step on any loose rocks or bones. Granted, the odds were pretty good that whatever had lived here was long gone, but no sense in taking chances. Running into a cave dragon or an olm—or, Epona forfend, a buggane—would be almost as bad as meeting Chrysalis herself.

Bon Bon paused, balanced precariously on three hooves with her fourth

stretched out over a particularly bone-crowded patch of stone. Almost as bad as Chrysalis…

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

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

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

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

Monumentally, flabbergastingly stupid idea.

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

Don't even think about it.

She thought about it.

Queen Chrysalis' dull blue tail, membranous and tattered, whipped angrily in

the air as she stalked to and fro in front of Princess Cadence's prison. A small hole had been smashed into the side of the alicorn's cell, and Chrysalis had dragged Cadence's head through it, locking her in place with a ring of crystal spikes pressed tight against her neck. The changeling queen came to a halt, her back to the trapped princess, and said, "Well. I am a patient soul, I hope, but everyone has their breaking point, and you, princess, have just reached mine." Her horn flickered with green light, and Cadence whimpered as the crystals around her neck grew inward, biting deeper into her skin. "I am going to ask one last time, and if I don't receive a satisfactory answer, you will be losing that lovely head of yours. The traitor I left to be executed has mysteriously vanished. Twilight here—" she nodded towards her second prisoner, the lavender unicorn lying unconscious on the cave floor "—has not been in a condition to perform valiant rescues, and the mare herself was hardly going to be going anywhere under her own power." The queen turned, and stared into Cadence's eyes. "I could taste her weakness, and it was most certainly not feigned. This leaves, then, only you as a possible culprit behind her disappearance, my pretty little pony princess. So, one last time—" The crystals grew by another fraction of a centimeter, and a drop of blood appeared on the alicorn's rosy coat "—where is she?"

"I—I really don't—I couldn't see or hear anything, I—" Cadence trailed off in a choking gasp as the jagged noose around her neck tightened. The changeling queen shrugged. "That's a shame. I had been planning to keep you around as insurance in case anything went wrong, but I suppose Twilight Sparkle will still make a more than adequate hostage, should it come to that. Goodbye, princ—"

"She didn't do it!"

Tattered wings buzzing, Chrysalis whirred about to face the three unicorns she had enchanted to serve as her bridesmaids. Lyra had stepped forward and was

staring up at the queen, her ears flattened and her body tense. In a shaky but clear voice, she repeated, “She didn’t do it.”

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

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

The changeling queen slid a forked tongue across her fangs. Behind her, Cadence gasped as the crystal vise drew back into the rock, and without turning she said, “I will be closing that opening in five seconds, princess. I would suggest removing your neck from it before I do.” Cadence did so. There was a sound like the shattering of frozen trees in midwinter as crystalline shafts spread out to seal the princess back inside her prison, and then the changeling queen said to Lyra, “Well then. Most impressive. Where, pray tell, is ‘Bon Bon’ now? I would love to ask her how she accomplished this extraordinary feat.”

“I don’t know, and if I did I wouldn’t—“ The words ended in yelp of pain as Chrysalis wrenched the unicorn up into the air, holding her aloft in a glittering green cloud of magic. She flipped Lyra upside down, and bringing her face to within a few centimeters of the pale green mare’s, Chrysalis hissed, “Oh, you would tell me.

Perhaps the alicorn's mind is a bit too complex for me to beguile, but it would take me but a moment to sink you under my Glamour again, and then you would be horrified by the thought that you had ever even dreamed of defying me. So, since you will pardon me for not taking you at your word, I think it's high time I put you back under my control."

SHAAaaa hou hou hou hou hoouuu!

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

SHAAAA AH Ah hou hou hou! Shra HAAAaaaa!

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

SHAAA ARAhahaooo!

Rocks and dislodged crystal fragments clattered out from a small opening about halfway up the walls of the chamber, and moments later Bon Bon emerged, kicking and squirming desperately as she fought to work her way through the hole. Still struggling, she glanced over the scene laid out below her, spotted Lyra, and

whinnied, “Lyra! Lyra, run! Run!” Then, with one last flailing contortion the little changeling broke free of the crevice and half-tumbled, half-galloped down a steep incline to the floor of the chamber. “It’s coming! Get away get away RUN!”

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

SHRAAHAAA!

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

There was a brief moment of shocked stillness, and then the monstrosity lunged at Chrysalis, its fangs bared and howling like the north wind. The changeling queen threw herself up into the air, screaming “*A buggane?* You crazy, iron-brained, Seelie fool! Bell-addled! Sun-dazzl—Augh!” She snapped her wings flat and fell to

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

The buggane jumped.

Chrysalis fired.

WHANckrnch. Chrysalis' spell had struck the creature in the very center of its forehead, sinking in like a stone dropped into loose sand, and the monster had spasmed, causing it to barely miss the changeling queen and slam hard into the cave wall to her left. It scrabbled at the wall for a moment before losing its grip, and then rolled down on to the cave floor, where it rested for a moment, twitching. At length it raised itself to its hind legs, swaying like a column about to fall, and lunged at Chrysalis. The queen's horn flared and another beam of magic plunged into the buggane's forehead. Its pace slowed from a gallop, to a walk, to an amble—and then

it stood motionless, towering above Chrysalis as she gritted her teeth and poured torrents of burning Glamour directly into the stupefied creature's brain. She continued casting the spell for nearly thirty seconds after the creature had come to a halt, and then, slowly and fearfully, she broke the connection and stepped back, watching the monster with a wary eye.

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

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

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

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

on the ground and stirring as she slowly worked her way back to consciousness, and smiled. Yes. Yes, that should do nicely. Green flame slithered up her body, burning away her changeling shape and replacing it with Princess Cadence's body, and her horn dimmed, plunging the chamber into darkness. It was an indulgence, certainly, but she'd been through a lot today, and she thought that she deserved to indulge herself a little bit. A spot of prisoner-taunting would be just the thing to return her to her usual sunny self.