

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Shush, now! What’s the use of having bits if we don’t spend them on something fun now and again? I’m going out this afternoon to get some rennet apples from Sweet Apple Acres and pick some marsh mallow for that *pâte de guimauve* recipe

I've been wanting to try, and I'll stop by *La Musette D'Avoine* to make the reservation while I'm out. Does that sound good?"

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

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

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

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

"Granny Smith's granddaughter saw them too, though, and she's generally really dependable."

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

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

Bon Bon nuzzled Lyra's mane. "I know. I'll be careful." She climbed the cellar stairs, gave her marefriend a reassuring wave, retrieved Lyra's saddlebag from its usual resting place (wedged under the chest of drawers in their bedroom), and trotted out of the

house. As the door shut behind her, she paused for a moment, and glancing back murmured, “Believe me, sweetie, I know.”

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The shadows had grown longer, but dusk was still some hours off yet. Water squelched up around Bon Bon’s hooves as the sphagnum moss strewn across the marshy ground sank beneath her weight. There weren’t “paths,” per se, here; few ponies came this way, largely because, not so long ago when Ponyville was a younger settlement and the Everfree was still putting up more than a token resistance to the interlopers, few ponies came back. It was still a dangerous place, but Bon Bon was more familiar with it than most who knew her would have guessed. She was not proud of this familiarity, and there were times, when the sun shone down bright and the laughing of foals at play filtered up from the lane in front of their home, that she tried to pretend to herself that all the old familiarity was dead, and that if she ever dared to wander too far from the borders of town her chances of survival would be just as slight as those of any other pony—any normal pony.

There were other times, though, when the lies she told herself weakened, and when the crisp, restrained order of their neat little home seemed to lose its solidity. When the sun had set and the moon was nothing more than a thin scimitar’s-edge of light in the sky, when the wind blew wildly and the rain lashed against the windows, when the world grew eerie and that eeriness hissed and hummed its shadowed way along ancient paths that, though they had been long since paved over and civilized, and seemed quite dead in the light of the sun, still retained a hidden life of their own—then, sometimes her marefriend would be woken by the sound of hooves against wooden planks as Bon Bon paced the floors of their solid safe little home, or by the shivering of Bon Bon’s cold body against Lyra’s own as she whimpered with her eyes clenched shut. Lyra had long since

cottoned on to the fact that, whatever caused these fits, Bon Bon wasn't able to explain them, and when they struck Lyra did her best to comfort her marefriend, and didn't pester her with questions after they had passed. Bon Bon was grateful to her for that.

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

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

surely she could resist; surely she was strong enough now. So instead of running, she stood and waited.

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

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

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

The stallion blinked. “What?”

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

“But—I don’t—I didn’t—we did?”

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

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

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

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

“Bon Bon.”

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

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



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

“I’ve not told anypony, no.”

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

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

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

come along, like you just did...well, even the ponies' finicky guardian, that Sun Princess, could hardly object to a little catch-and-release, all in good fun, of course."

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

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

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

"Lyra? And who might Lyra be?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Invasion? What invasion?”

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

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

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

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

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

The kelpie paddled backwards into the putrid waters of the swamp, eyes still fixed on Bon Bon. “You know, I don’t believe I will. I was right, I think—you’ve gone

native, and what's more I think the Unseelie Court knows it too, or suspects. If you're lucky, they've just forgotten that you exist, but I wouldn't bet on it."

"Tell me!"

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