

Changeling

Part 1

Now:

Kendra stabbed at the hissing, mostly transparent fairy with her sword, but it curved itself impossibly quick, and the blade splashed harmlessly into the water instead. With another vicious hiss, the fairy darted forward and sank its small but needle-sharp teeth into Kendra's booted ankle. Kendra gasped in pain and said an expletive under her breath, but the bite also slowed the fairy enough that the next quick blow from her sword severed its head from its body.

The fairy mewed once, piteously, then as Kendra watched, it dissolved back into the stream it was swimming in, becoming indistinguishable from the clear water swirling around Kendra's feet and ankles. Clear, that is, except for the thin swirls of red coming from her bitten ankle.

Kendra swore softly again, and waded back to shore where her pack waited, high and dry. She threw herself down onto the brown damp leaves beneath the tree and rummaged in her pack. First for the cloth and sheath to clean and stow her sword, then for the roll of bandages, and dry shoes. She stripped her wet boots, splashed the two almost perfectly round holes in her ankle with rubbing alcohol, and bandaged them efficiently. Dry shoes went on over top, but Kendra stayed seated on the dead leaves.

She stared at the rushing stream. The newly hatched fairy she had just dispatched was larger, faster and meaner than it should have been, this time of year. As the two she had killed yesterday had been, and the one two days before that. Did that mean anything? If so, what?

"What do you think, Trevor?" She murmured. As usual, her late mentor didn't answer, and as usual, she felt a pang at his loss.

With a tired sigh she hauled herself to her feet, lifting her head to take a deep breath of the clean air. Spring in Alberta scented the air with moist soil, rotting leaves and the promise of new growth. It was also the time of year that lesser fairies hatched in the moving water of the many rivers and streams around here, and Kendra spent many hours with wet and cold feet, hunting them.

She walked slowly back to the small gravel parking lot where she had left her Jeep. A trail runner in bright blue and green sports clothes ran past her in the opposite direction, breathing loudly and rhythmically, and only casting a mildly curious glance her way as he passed. Alberta was one of the better places for being left alone to do your own thing, no matter how strange it seemed to others. As long as you weren't in high school, that is.

But it was still complicated sometimes when she had to kill fairies that had learned to look convincingly human. They still conveniently dissolved into smoke when they died – Trevor hypothesized that it was because they weren't actually from this plane of existence – but people tended to get a little upset when they saw her kill what looked like a human, even when there was only dirty clothes and no body, after. She preferred to kill them when they were nasty, biting water sprites that barely anyone – any human, anyway – even knew existed.

When Kendra finally stepped out of the trees and onto the gravel parking lot, what she saw made her stop suddenly, like her feet had spontaneously rooted to the ground. She shook her head in disbelief.

Leaning against the back of her Jeep was a woman of exquisite beauty, looking remarkably out of place standing in the gravel parking lot of a provincial park, wearing Gucci and Prada, and radiating confidence and control. As if she *owned* this parking lot.

Which she just might, though indirectly, so no one knew.

The woman straightened and smiled warmly at Kendra, and Kendra found herself smiling back, despite herself. She knew she was being manipulated, knew that this woman would only be here to ask something of her – and inevitably it would be something Kendra wouldn't want to give – and smiled back anyway, because she couldn't do otherwise.

“Hello, Highness.” The woman said. Her voice was low and sweet, with subtle undertones of bells. “It's good to see you again.”

Kendra pushed herself into motion, crossing the distance to her Jeep, opening the hatch and tossing her gear and wet boots into the plastic bin she kept in the back for exactly this. She concentrated hard on these mundane actions and was gratified when the smile involuntarily on her face relaxed some, though it didn't leave entirely.

“Aren't you even going to say hello to an old friend, Highness?”

Kendra kept her face turned towards the inside of her Jeep and answered without turning around. “Don't call me that.”

“It's your title, Highness, whether you acknowledge it or not.”

Kendra felt anger stir in her chest, and she encouraged it, hot and bubbling. It would provide

some protection against the other's magic. As the anger rose, she turned, finally, though she didn't look the woman in the eye. "Whatever you want, Rione, whatever you're here for, I'm not interested. I don't want any part. Go on back to my brother, find someone else."

She let the anger propel her to the driver's door of her Jeep. She climbed in, and though she fumbled a bit with the key, managed to get it in the ignition and turned.

Nothing happened but a click.

She turned it back and tried again.

Click.

Kendra looked in her mirror to see Rione standing at the back corner of her Jeep, arms crossed, and a smug smile on her face.

With a sigh, she opened the door and swung her feet out, though she didn't stand up. "Rione, would you please take your hex off my car so I can go home?"

Another glance showed that Rione was gone from behind the Jeep. A moment later the passenger door opened, and she slid gracefully in beside Kendra. "You obviously haven't been practicing with your magic like you should, my dear, or you could remove it yourself. But I'll do it. I'd rather talk at your place, anyway. I'll even make sure you have some good wine.

Kendra sighed again as she realized that there was only one other car in the parking lot – an older compact car, not something Rione would ever drive, presumably belonging to the trail runner who passed her on her way out. But Rione hadn't walked here, not in those shoes. She slowly pulled herself back into the driver's seat and closed the door, considering whether she should grab her gear and head back into the woods to camp for awhile. Rione wouldn't be following her in what she was wearing, but she might have a minion somewhere who would.

"I know what you're thinking, Highness." Rione said calmly. "You can try to avoid me, but I need to speak with you, so speak with you I will. You have not developed your magic enough to counter mine, and your physical skills are not sufficient to get you away from me. Unless you kill me. Are you willing to do that?"

Was she? Kendra had to consider for a moment, but only a moment. "No."

"Then let's go to your place where it's more comfortable, and we'll talk. And perhaps, among other things, we can discuss your distressing choice in dying your hair."

Kendra rolled her eyes in resignation. This time when she turned the key, her Jeep's engine rumbled to life.