

Changeling, Book 2

Part 11

Now:

Kendra pulled her Jeep onto highway 16, heading west out of Edmonton. The road curved gently, swooped under a few overpasses, then the speed limit went up to 110 km per hour, and she settled into highway driving, out to Rione's old estate. There were portals to Faerie that were closer and a little easier to get to, but today she wanted the calming effect a highway drive had on her. And for some reason, she wanted the connection to her past she would get there.

She shook her head to herself. A part of her was still trying to deny that Trevor's family had anything to do with the massacre, but there was not doubt in her mind that Trevor's Uncle Alex had supplied the Elfsbane. Was that as far as the family's involvement went? A deep uneasy feeling in her belly told Kendra that no, she thought there was more.

These thoughts went around and around in her head, mixed in with memories of Trevor. How he killed the windigo and saved her life the first time they met. His endless patience, teaching her to shoot a bow and throw a knife. His proud smile the first time she took down a fairy by herself.

Kendra was so caught up in her thoughts and memories, she nearly missed the turn, and had to stomp on her brakes and yank on the steering wheel, making a wide turn that nearly went into the ditch. A large pickup following close behind her had to make a quick change into the other lane of the highway to avoid hitting her, and he laid on his horn to express his displeasure. Kendra cheerfully waved her middle finger back at him, though he was long past able to see her.

Several more minutes of driving brought her to Rione's country home. Kendra hadn't been here since the Duke had died, impaled on Kendra's blade at the foot of the king's bed.

Despite how things had ended between Kendra and the late Duke, Kendra was saddened – and a little shocked – to see the disrepair Rione's place had fallen into. Rione had loved this house, and had taken meticulous care of both house and grounds. Now there were dead leaves and branches

everywhere, dead koi in the pond, rampant weeds and overgrown shrubs. Rione would have been appalled.

She crossed the graceful little bridge and watched the ghosts haunting her. Rione and Trevor were especially loud today, because of where she was and where she had just been, most likely.

The large, solid wood door to the house was locked, but Kendra had learned a long time ago how to deal with that. She pulled her tactical knife from her pocket and pricked the pad of her index finger with its razor-sharp tip, until a single drop of blood welled. She touched the heavy deadbolt lock with her bloody finger and sent out a whisper of magic. The lock clicked obediently, and Kendra opened the door and stepped into the house.

The moment she stepped in, the hairs on the back of her neck went up. Something was going on in this supposedly empty house, something that set all of Kendra's instincts on edge. And it involved fairy magic.

Silently she cursed her lack of weapons. Gylan would be offended if she showed up in his palace to visit him fully armed, so she had left her arsenal at home or stashed in her Jeep. All she had on her was her tactical knife with its five inch blade. And her magic. That would have to be enough.

She put a small slice in the ball of her left thumb, and wrapped her magic tightly around herself as Rione had taught her, so that whoever was coming wouldn't get forewarning of her presence or her Royal blood. Kendra closed her eyes to listen and feel intently. The back of the house was where the magic was. Probably the study. Someone was using the portal.

Kendra had just started towards the study when she heard loud thumps and yelling up ahead. A young girl in a ragged tunic appeared in the doorway Kendra was heading towards, still five meters away. The girl yelped and jumped back. A moment later a half-dozen humans, ranging from teenagers to about mid-thirties rushed into the room and surrounded her.

She looked at the worn and dirty tunics they wore and the fear and desperation on their faces, and she knew. These were humans that the fairies had abducted, kept as servants – and sometimes food – who had taken advantage of the chaos in Faerie after the massacre and had escaped. But how had they gotten here?

Her answer appeared in the doorway. A human was half leading, half dragging a fairy by a grip on his collar. The shirt the human woman had her fist wrapped in had started its life as high quality, but now it was torn and filthy. The fairy was tall, slim, and like his shirt, had once been beautiful. With the lack of the cloves and onion stench of lesser fairies, Kendra surmised that their prisoner was a higher fairy, probably a noble.

The fairy's hands were bound at the wrist, and he was blindfolded. He lifted his head and

Kendra realized with a bit of shock that their prisoner was Baron Vyncis, a rather obnoxious higher fairy who had previously tried to kill her. He was a distant relative of Rione's, which was probably why he had known about this place and had taken the humans here when forced to take them through the portal from Faerie.

Bruises were evident on his fair skin, and he moved unsteadily, like he was drunk, but Kendra was interested to note that there was no blood on him except for one spot on one hand, drying quickly. The humans obviously knew how fairy magic worked and had been careful not to shed any blood but the minimum necessary as they subdued their prisoner and forced him to take them to the human realm.

“Nomi, she's got a knife!” called one of the teenaged humans in the room.

“Yeah? Well I've got a gun that kills fairies.” said the human, Nomi. To illustrate, she lifted the hand not gripping the fairy's collar, and pointed a pistol over his shoulder at Kendra.

Kendra held out her hands, her knife grasped by the end of the handle with only her thumb and forefinger. “It's all right, I'm not going to hurt you.” She wasn't nearly as good at glamour and persuasion as Rione had been, but she slipped a little thread of magic into her words. *Be calm...there's no threat here.*

“Damn right you're not going to hurt us.” Said Nomi. She nodded to one of the other humans who darted forward and snatched the knife from Kendra's hand.

Something in the cadence of Nomi's voice was hauntingly familiar. Kendra frowned, trying to grasp the elusive thread. She looked closely at the woman for the first time, finally focusing past the barrel of the gun pointed at her.

Kendra gasped, and all control of her magic slipped from her grasp, and she had a momentary buzzy, dizzy sort of feeling. Behind the shaggy hair and dirty face, she was looking at a younger version of her human mother. The mother who had raised her, thinking she was her own flesh and blood. The mother who had been killed by a windigo on the front porch of their home, when it had been sent after Kendra.

She was looking at the woman whose place she had taken as an infant, who had grown up in Faerie as a slave, so that Kendra could have a safe place to grow up, far away from the dangers and machinations of the Fairy court.

Vyncis stirred and turned his blindfolded face towards Kendra. “Highness?” He slurred through bruised and swollen lips.

The reaction among the humans was immediate; fists were clenched and raised, a couple of them grabbed up large, sturdy candlesticks from a nearby table and hefted them like clubs.

“Nomi?” One of them asked a little hesitantly. “Is that really the Prince?”

Kendra took a deep breath to center herself, and brought her eyes to meet Nomi's. Her mother's warm brown eyes looked back at her, but this time she could meet them without flinching.

“Yes.” Said Kendra. “I am the king's sister.”

Vyncis threw himself forward against Nomi's grip. His shirt, already ripped, tore in her hand and he pulled himself free to throw himself at Kendra's feet. He grabbed one of her ankles with his bound hands.

“Please, Highness! Help me! These humans have beaten and abducted me, forced me to bring them here, They - ”

His plea was cut off as Nomi roughly grabbed what was left of his shirt and hauled him back to his feet, the fabric pulling tight around his throat and cutting off his air. Nomi waved back the humans who were shifting angrily and on the verge of attacking Kendra with their hands, feet, and makeshift clubs.

Kendra eyed them warily. Her training with Trevor and her magic ensured that if they attacked, she would be able to do some serious damage to them. At least until they beat her unconscious. She didn't want to, though; fairies had done enough damage to these people, she didn't want to add to it.

They seemed to be settling down, at least a little bit, at Nomi's gesture, though. Kendra turned her attention back to their leader and her pistol, once again pointed at her over the fairy's shoulder.

“Before you go feeling too sorry for this one,” said Nomi, giving Vyncis a shake to illustrate which one she meant, “you should know that he was one of the ones that arranged that big shoot-out in the royal palace.”

Kendra reeled back, feeling as dizzy as when she realized who the leader of the humans was to her. Here he was, one of the conspirators right in front of her.

Nomi was watching her closely, gaging her reaction, so Kendra took another deep breath and gathered herself for at least the outward appearance of calm, though her head was spinning and her guts churning.

“I'll give him to you.” Said Nomi. “We don't need him anymore, and you obviously want him. But you have to give us your oath that we – all of us here – can go free and no fairies will pursue us or ever try to recapture us or make us go back. We want to be free of you forever.”

Kendra took another deep breath. “You deserve to be free of fairies forever, but I can only swear to make it known that you – all of you – are under my protection and not to be harmed in any way. I think I have enough of a reputation in the Fairy court that no one will try anything. But I can't guarantee it. If a fairy stumbles over one of you by accident, for example.”

Nomi considered this, her eyes narrowing as she thought, just like her mothers had, Kendra

noticed. She felt a pang of loss that she had thought she had long since put behind her.

One of the humans shifted impatiently. “Nomi, just give him to her. Let the fairies take care of their own, we have to get out of here.”

Nomi shook her head. “Not without her oath that she'll protect us.” She turned to Kendra. “OK, your oath. Then we go and he's all yours.”

Vyncis moaned and lurched against Nomi's grip on his shirt, but she yanked him back and shoved the muzzle of her pistol into his neck and he subsided.

Kendra nodded. “All right. I'll give you my oath. But I need my knife back for that.” She held out her hand to the human who had taken it from her. He looked nervously over at Nomi, who nodded, and he shuffled forward to place it in Kendra's outstretched hand, though he was careful not to make any skin contact, as if Kendra were contagious.

She flicked the knife open and was about to re-open the cut on her left hand when a wave of magic washed over her, setting all her magical senses tingling. Someone was using the portal. Lots of someones.