

Changeling, Book 2

Part 12

Then:

“Get back, get back!” Dave waved them on frantically, so Paul and Jeff hustled ahead of him to the end of the corridor. They rounded the corner with their guns out and ready. The pair of guards just down from the corner had loaded crossbows in their hands, but Paul and Jeff, both on a wire's edge of tension, took them both out with bursts from their machine guns before they could fire.

Dave came skidding around the corner when a deafening blast followed, throwing shrapnel and other softer, redder things after him. His wide, crazy grin flashed. “Claymores were a good idea, right?”

“We need to figure out how to get out of here.” Jeff's voice was high with tension and loud from the ear-blasting noise they had been making.

“This way!” A voice called from up the corridor. It was one of the human servants who had helped smuggle them into the palace. He leaned his head and shoulders from around the next corner and gestured them on. They followed at a run for a short distance.

The human stopped and gestured at a doorway up ahead that had two large pillars on either side, each with a vine growing around it. “There.” He said. “That's a portal room. If you can find a fairy and make him take you to the human realm, you can get home that way. But be careful, the portal is guarded. By elites. Good luck!” He gave them a short wave and turned to run off.

“Wait!” Paul called after him. “Don't you want to come with us? Get home?”

He shook his head. “I have family here. I won't go without them.” Then he disappeared down the corridor.

“He said find a fairy.” said Dave. “Right.” He did a quick scan of the corridor they stood in. Other than the open doorway to the portal room with its two pillars, there were two large ornate doors on the opposite side, with no indication of where they might lead. Choosing one at random, Dave tried

the handle. Finding it locked, he fired a burst at the handle from his gun, then stormed on through, leaving Paul and Jeff with little choice but to follow him. So they did.

On the other side of the doors was a courtyard that had at least half its floorspace given over to large raised beds filled with trees, shrubs, and a tangle of other greenery. Paul watched the plants carefully as they went through, remembering vividly the tree that had tried to eat him on his first trip to Faerie.

None of the plants seemed carnivorous, though. Or at least, none seriously attempted to eat them. Towards the far end of the courtyard were two closed doors and an open corridor. Dave, in the lead, went down the open corridor, and the other two followed.

More doors. Dave opened one, seemingly at random. The three fanned in. It was a study, or office of some sort. It contained a desk covered in stacks of paper, and a couple shelves of books and scrolls. And it was deserted.

The three exchanged glances and slipped back out into the corridor. The sound of a distant explosion rumbled through the stone of the building.

Dave grinned again. "They must have found some of the claymores I set on the way in."

Jeff opened another door, stuck his head in, then waved Dave after him. It occurred to Paul that it hadn't been a good idea for all three of them to go into the last room leaving no one to guard their exit. And the outer exit too, for that matter. But there was only the three of them, at least he could guard this door. He whispered as much to Jeff, before the other two slipped past the door.

It took a couple minutes before Paul started to regret his decision. As he stood watching an empty corridor, nerves singing and ears straining, his mind ran with all sorts of pictures of what was happening in the room with Dave and Jeff, and what was happening outside these chambers, with the fairy defenders mobilizing to find and kill them. Some of those pictures were possible, some, he knew, were impossible, or nearly so. That didn't prevent his racing mind from presenting those pictures to him, though.

Fortunately, Paul hadn't yet completely lost his mind over possibilities before Jeff and Dave returned. Dave had his gun slung over his back, and his arm around the throat of an adolescent male fairy, his other arm holding one of the fairy's arms in a painful joint lock.

The young fairy's hair was tousled, and he was wearing loose, comfortable clothing; he had obviously been gotten out of bed and out of sleep. His eyes were wide and rolling with a combination of rage and fear, and looking at him, Paul wasn't sure which would win out.

"Ok, let's go." Dave said through clenched teeth.

They re-traced their steps to the outer door, Paul and Jeff leading the way down the passage and

through the courtyard full of greenery. At the exterior door, the one across from the portal room, Paul cracked the door open to look, but shut it again as a troop of fairy guards with crossbows ran past.

The glint in the fairy boy's eyes warned Paul just in time, and he leaped forward to slap his hand across the boy's mouth before he yelled out. Dave tightened his grip on the boy's arm and neck, and after a moment he stopped struggling. At a nod from Jeff, Dave relaxed his hand slightly. Paul removed his hand, and when the boy opened his mouth to gasp for breath, Jeff stuffed a handkerchief from his pocket into it.

Jeff stepped close and locked eyes with the boy. "Try anything like that again, and I'll shoot you. Got that?"

The boy nodded. The fear had a slight edge over the rage, at the moment.

"How are we going to get past the guards at the portal?" Paul asked quietly.

"I've got an idea about that." Said Dave. "Here, take him."

Paul carefully took the boy from Dave, maintaining the pressure on his arm and throat as they did so. Jeff stood ready, watching, pistol in hand.

Dave rummaged in his nearly empty rucksack. "I have one claymore left. I was saving it for an emergency. I think this qualifies."

"Before we go." Jeff drew the Bowie knife from his belt and placed the tip on the boy's solar plexus. The boy's eyes widened and his nostrils flared. He hadn't expected to be threatened like this. "When we get to the portal room," Jeff said, low and intense, "I'm going to cut your hand, you're going to take us through the portal back to the human realm. You do that, and we'll release you unharmed. You don't do that, I'll shoot you. First to maim you, than I'll shove this knife in your chest. Right here." He leaned on the knife just enough to make the tip split the skin. "Understand?"

The boy nodded.

"And if he doesn't, I will." added Dave, his manic grin flashing. "Cause we don't have anything to lose. Got that?"

The boy nodded again, a little harder.

"Ok, let's go."

Jeff took another quick peek out the door to be sure that the way was clear. A nod to Dave, who slipped out the door. Paul heard the soft pattering of Dave's boots, a metallic sliding sound, Dave's boots again moving fast, then a loud explosion. They opened the door to see Dave pick himself off the ground and turn grinning to them.

"There!" He said with manic cheerfulness. "I told you it would -"

What it was they would never know. Three crossbow bolts appeared in quick succession in

Dave's chest, landing with three meaty thunks.

As Dave toppled slowly backwards, Jeff jumped out into the corridor and let off several bursts from his machine gun, in the direction the crossbow bolts came from. As Paul followed, Jeff began walking down the corridor, yelling loudly and wordlessly, firing sharp bursts one right after the other.

Paul looked down the corridor, but it was empty of live, firing fairies, there were only the dead, bleeding bodies of the ones that had killed Dave.

“Jeff!” Paul yelled, but between Jeff's yelling and the rattle of his gun, Paul's voice was drowned out. And with his hands full and half his attention on the young fairy captive, he couldn't grab Jeff or throw anything. *Dammit.*

So he reached down deep, remembering long-ago, half-forgotten memories of a drama teacher teaching him to project his voice, and pulled the sound almost from his crotch, trying to time it to come between bursts from the gun.

“JEFF!”

The fairy winced in his hands, but Jeff must have heard that time, because he stopped firing and turned slightly.

“Come on, man! We have to go!”

Jeff turned all the way back, looking momentarily confused, like he wasn't sure where he was, all of a sudden, or why Paul was yelling at him.

“Let's go!”

Jeff's face cleared and he came back to Paul, though he stopped for a moment next to Dave's body, his face contorting briefly in pain. Then he took a deep breath and nodded, stepping past them and leading the way into the portal room.

Which was a nightmare. The claymore had pulverized the guards standing duty here, and bits of bone, blood and flesh dripped wetly down from all the walls. Paul felt the young fairy squirm under his grip, and he wondered briefly if the boy was going to be sick.

Jeff roughly grabbed the boy's free hand and made a quick slice across the palm.

“Take us to the human realm. Now.”

They marched the few steps across the room, Paul still holding the boy's neck and one wrist, Jeff holding the other wrist with a bloody hand. He placed the cut hand on the bare clay of the far wall, and they all walked through.

They emerged from a hillside of mixed sand and small rocks. Tufts of scrubby grass grew between tumbled boulders. The sun was high in the sky, beating down on them fiercely out of a cloudless, bleached looking sky. A short distance away, a road – really no more than a pair of beaten

tracks in the dirt – wound away into the hills.

Paul hadn't realized that his hands and arms had relaxed slightly in relief and bewilderment, until the boy wrenched himself out of his hands and went pelting off into the scrub.

Jeff lifted his pistol, but Paul caught his arm. “Don't. You said we'd let him go. He's harmless, anyway.”

With a small grunt of acknowledgement and possibly agreement, Jeff lowered the gun.

“So this looks like Earth. The human realm.” He looked around a bit more, then back to Paul. “But this sure isn't Alberta. Where the hell are we?”