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opening extract from

Shapeshifter 4: Dowsing the Dead

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'Oi!!! Wake up!'

Dax shot up in bed with a grunt. 'What?! What?!'

Gideon scratched his messy fair hair and stared at his best friend. 'You were doing it again!'

'What?!'

'That screetchy thing. I'm telling you, mate—it gives me the heebies!'

Dax felt his throat. It stung. He shuddered.

'I think you should go to Owen—you're still getting that dream, aren't you?' Gideon padded across the bedside mat and peered hard at Dax. 'You don't look good, mate. I mean—you know—you're a bit pasty and all that. Go to Owen—or Janey.'

Dax sighed and shook his head. He'd already been to Janey, the college doctor, but there was nothing she could do. For weeks now, he'd been getting worse; finding it hard to eat, to concentrate in class, to laugh at Gideon's daft jokes. He couldn't even get excited about the tree house they were building in the grounds of Fenton Lodge—and he had *always* wanted a tree house. He kept hoping that this strange weariness, which was weighing him down like a coat made of sandbags, would just go away. Every day he pushed food in and took the multivitamins that Janey gave him, but nothing made any difference.

He stared through the tall Georgian window of their bedroom to the beautiful Cumbrian valley which was now their home, and felt like crying. He got up. 'Sorry, mate,' he said to Gideon, who was still hovering and staring at him with concern. 'Maybe I should go into another room—one of the spare ones—for a while.'

'Don't be stupid,' said Gideon. 'It wouldn't be the same in here without all that rank fox fur on the window seat and the feathers dropping in my bedside water. Hey!' Gideon dropped onto his bed again, his green eyes wide with a sudden

possibility. 'What if you're going to shift into something new? Eh? Maybe all this tired and wobbly stuff is because you're going to shift into . . . I dunno . . . a—a dragon or something? You could be doing a meta-metamorphic thing. You could be crystallizing! You know . . . in a crystal.'

'Metamor*phosing*? In a *chrysalis*?' chortled Dax and Gideon nodded eagerly.

'Yeah—about to transform into . . . ' Gideon's voice dropped deep and dramatic. ' . . . something from the PIT OF HELL . . . ' He raised one eyebrow and held out his palms, inviting Dax to join in with his mad suggestion.

Dax laughed again but a wave of weariness stole over him as he went out of the room and down the softly lit corridor to the boys' bathroom. It was early and nobody else was up. He stared at his reflection in the mirror above the sinks. Gideon was right. The gloss was fading in his thick dark hair and his brown eyes seemed to be sinking back into his face. Lines of tiredness curved beneath them, shading grey into his skin. His lips were thin and pale. He ran the water hot and scrubbed his face hard with a flannel, pummelling some temporary colour into his cheeks. Almost

as bad as how he felt was the constant querying from Gideon or Lisa or Mia. You'd think they would have got used to it by now. He looked awful and felt awful, and none of the tests the scientists had done so far could explain why.

The medical room which Janey ran upstairs looked much like a medical room in any boarding school or college. It wasn't. Although Janey was a qualified doctor and seemed to genuinely care for them all, she was also one of the scientists who lived with them at Fenton Lodge. The scientists were here to study ten extraordinary children with powers so phenomenal that the government chose to hide them in the loneliest range of Cumbrian hills it could find.

Gideon, for example, might look like an ordinary thirteen year old and most of the time he behaved like one too—but Gideon could lift a television three metres into the air now. With just his mind. He was a telekinetic. Next door was Barry, who could make himself invisible. Jennifer, down the girls' end of the dormitory wing, could do the same.

Dax's own power was to live his life as a boy part-time. He was also a part-time fox and a

part-time peregrine falcon. This meant everything to him. It had released him from a sad, grey existence and brought him into one of the most exclusive gangs in the world. The Cola Club. It had nearly killed him—and it had brought him the time of his life.

'Maybe your time is up though,' he said to himself as he pulled the plug out and the water gurgled away. Through the steam across the mirror the boy gazing back looked like a ghost. Perhaps it was a premonition.

'Take your seats, *please*! And get ready for the geography lesson of a lifetime!'

Mrs Dann beamed at the class and one or two of them chuckled. After breakfast, the Children Of Limitless Ability (Colas) began their day with Mrs Dann in Geography. It didn't matter that they were the most amazing living beings on the planet—they still had to keep up with the national curriculum. Later they would go into Development sessions in the basement of the lodge, where it was considered safe to run their *other* classes.

Dax slid into the chair behind his desk and tried not to notice Mia glancing back at him as she did so often now, and sending him a wave of healing which felt lovely for about three seconds and then faded as fast as a retreating wave.

It was a sign of how worried the authorities were that Owen had even asked Mia to help. That went against *all* his rules. At fourteen, Mia was getting tall and her dark hair had grown to her shoulders since Dax had first met her. She had lovely, violet blue eyes and a kind smile. She was not breathtakingly beautiful, but she always took the breath away from anyone who first met her. This was because of the Mia Effect. That's what all the Colas called it. Mia's power to heal was so incredibly strong that just being in her company could make you feel fantastic. Everyone—male, female, young or old—fell for Mia. The feeling, until you were exposed to it for long enough to get used to it, was quite unsettling.

She came over to him now, while Mrs Dann was clearing the whiteboard and writing out some headings about the Netherlands. She rested her hands on his desk and said: 'Dax—did you manage to get any sleep last night?' Her words buffeted

against him, warm and caring, but he wished she wouldn't. He couldn't give her the answer she wanted. He didn't meet her eyes, but rubbed his hair and coughed.

'Come on, Mia—back to your seat,' said Mrs Dann, chucking her whiteboard marker pen from hand to hand. 'I'm going to dazzle you all with the history of Holland's sea defences! Maybe even keep Mr Jones awake!' She gave a wry, but sympathetic grin.

It was in February that Dax had started finding it hard to sleep. At first he drifted off with everyone else, around 9.30 p.m., but he began to wake up very early. It didn't trouble him to begin with; he thought his nocturnal instincts as a fox probably had something to do with it. Then his 5 a.m. wake-up became 4 a.m., and then 3 a.m., 2 a.m. . . . eventually he was falling into bed, shattered, at 8.30 p.m., while the other Colas relaxed and chatted and played games in the common room—only to wake at midnight.

By day he grew vague and unable to concentrate in class—his class test results were appalling in March and that was when they started doing blood tests and checking his eyes, and trying out

tonics and iron pills and vitamins on him. They remained cheerful and upbeat in the medical room, but Dax could still smell the anxiety on Janey and Owen and their principal, Paulina Sartre. Despite his exhaustion, his fox senses remained as sharp as ever.

Today Dax wondered if it was possible to feel any worse and still be walking about looking almost normal. At his desk, as he got out his books, he felt as though he had shrunk away inside himself. As if he was a tiny, tiny creature, trying to operate a huge, cumbersome body with levers and wires from within a cramped, dark control room somewhere inside his head.

He was dimly aware of Clive standing up and turning to stare at him—asking him something. His mouth said something back, but Dax, working the wires and levers in the cramped dark control room in his head, had no idea what. Clive was his good friend from the world of non-Colas. Although he was quite definitely a genius in science and engineering, Clive had no supernatural powers. He was here at Fenton Lodge with them because he had shared in some of their adventures and the government was happier to have him on the inside, rather

than wandering around in public. He was also a useful boy to have around. A good comparison.

And it was Clive who stood it no longer. He dropped his Geography textbook with a thud and announced, 'All right! Enough's enough. You're killing him!' Mrs Dann turned round from the whiteboard in surprise.

'What do you mean, Clive?'

'Look at him!' said Clive, pushing his spectacles up his nose and then folding his arms across his chest (which always signalled that he meant business). 'He looks like a bowl of cold porridge—his eyes are always going funny and now he can't even speak properly! You've got to let him out! If you don't, I'm going to have to make an official complaint.'

The rest of the class stared at him, mouths open. Clive bumbled about, planning clever projects and frequently talking to himself. He was the school boffin in all the ways you would expect of a child genius—he even had the glasses, the bad hair, and the awful fashion sense to go with it. He was allowed almost free reign in the lab and the school workshops—but he was not given to ordering teachers around. Now he leaned on his

desk and peered across at his classmate. 'Talk again, Dax! Let them listen properly.'

Dax gaped at his old friend, and then squinted at him. He was back out of the little wires and levers room now, but his right side was weak and achey and his throat was dry. His tongue felt thick and too big for his mouth. He had only slept two hours in the last twenty-four.

'Say "*The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*!"—in your own time,' prompted Clive.

Dax furrowed his brow and gave up after 'The quick'—which came out 'Fwe—kweh . . . '

'All right—how about "*Mary had a little lamb; its fleece as white as snow*",' insisted Clive, his voice shrill with anxiety. Dax sighed heavily and now Mrs Dann sat down in a chair near his desk and nodded at him.

'Go on, Dax,' she said. She looked grave.

Dax rolled his pencil along with a shaky hand and said, 'Maaee ha . . . a lil la . . . herflee awaya sneh.' The sound of his voice terrified him. The weight of his right arm was tremendous.

'Oh my God,' said Mrs Dann, and it was the intense quietness of her voice that scared him more than her words. 'I think he's having a stroke.'