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Opening extract from

Changeling: Zombie Dawn

Written by

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The Changeling series by Steve Feasey

Changeling

Changeling: Dark Moon

Changeling: Blood Wolf

Changeling: Demon Games

Changeling: Zombie Dawn

STEVE FEASEY

ZOMBIE DAWN

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For Big Al.
Thank you for your unwavering belief and support

PROLOGUE

Caliban allowed the dead body of the woman to slip from his grasp and crumple to the floor at his feet, his victim's head hitting the hard stone with a dull thud. Unseeing eyes, already bereft of the life they once reflected, stared back at him accusingly, but he paid no attention to the reproachful look as he rose from his chair and moved towards the window. Already lost in his thoughts, he slowly drew his hand over blood-smeared lips, painting a ghastly, coppery, circus-clown's grin across his face.

The vampire stared out on to the impenetrable curtain of grey mist that swirled and danced before him. Beyond that curtain lay the human realm, although technically he himself was in a part of the Netherworld which had been translocated here to Iceland by his former sorceress, Gwendolin. The Tower of Leroth had remained in this place ever since he'd abandoned it after the werewolf boy had killed Gwendolin and the tower's powers had been lost along with her. But not, as the vampire had at first thought, forever. He stared out into the slow swirling mist again, his mind forming patterns and pictures in the murk.

He was in a strange mood. Mental exhaustion from planning what lay ahead had made him edgy and introspective,

and a small part of him wanted nothing more than to walk out through those grey shutters, enter the human realm and disappear: to hunt and feed undetected among his prey, as he had done for centuries, and leave behind the gruelling struggle for power that he was currently involved in. It was tempting to simply vanish but he knew that it was not his destiny. He was fated for greater things. He was to be the first lord of *two* realms: the human and the demon. And he would rule them both ruthlessly. But the struggle to achieve this aim was onerous, even for a creature like himself. He had a stranglehold on the Netherworld now. Those weak and gutless demon lords – the so-called rulers of the dark realm – had all fallen to him. Now it was the turn of the humans.

Caliban's new sorceress, Helde, had brought them here, opening a portal in the Netherworld for them to slip through. She had done so artfully, creating several decoy portals along with the one they were to use – too many for his altruistic do-gooder of a brother to check them all.

And now they were at the Tower of Leroth. Alone. Caliban had considered contacting some of his vampire brethren to join him to ensure that the tower would not be without a guard presence of some kind, but Helde had insisted that concealment was their greatest weapon, and that it should not be compromised in any way.

Helde claimed that the tower was key to their plans, that it was more than just a means of translocation and that other secrets were hidden within its walls – secrets that would

help them achieve their aim of subjugating the human realm and everyone in it forever.

A sound at the door made him stiffen, and the next thing he knew the sorceress had pushed it open and stepped inside. It was unlike him to be caught unawares like this, and he inwardly cursed himself for allowing it to happen. He kept his back to her, but when he spoke the anger in his voice was obvious. 'In future, you will knock and wait at the door until I tell you to enter. Is that clear?' Caliban turned from the window to glare at the sorceress who stood looking back at him.

'Is that clear?' he repeated.

'Yes. I am sorry. I forgot.'

She was a sight to behold. Every part of her was made up of hundreds of thousands of insects, each living creature clutching on to its neighbours to form a whole – a swarming, crawling, teeming resemblance of the human female she'd once been. She had been beautiful before they had burned her human body at the stake and Caliban thought – even in this grotesque reconstituted form – her beauty was still evident. He watched as small sections of the sorceress continuously dropped off, the insects hitting the floor with a hard little *snick!* before scurrying back to rejoin the writhing, fluid mass. Her various component parts were incapable of perfect adhesion, and this flaking-off of insects was a source of great distress to Helde: the more agitated she became, the greater the cascade of invertebrates falling from her. Judging by the flow of tiny creatures tumbling to

the floor at her feet now, Caliban reasoned that her latest attempt to find the thing she was looking for had been unsuccessful.

'You have failed again?' he asked, knowing that the phrasing of the question was sure to ignite her ire.

'This place!' She threw an arm up in frustration, and Caliban could not help but smile as two fingers of the hand flew off, the insects raining down on to the floor behind her before scuttling back to their comrades. 'It is a warren! These upper floors are not a problem. One staircase leads up, another down, and all the rooms have been searched thoroughly. But below, down in the lowest levels where all of those tunnels are cut through the rock . . .' She shook her head. 'There are more tunnels beneath *them*! The Shield exists. Skaleb could never have won the Demon Wars without it. The tower was too susceptible to attack otherwise. I *will* find it. It is down there somewhere.'

Skaleb had been the original owner of the tower, many centuries ago. But such history was of little concern to Caliban. The vampire sighed theatrically. 'I tire of this fruitless searching of yours. The thing you seek is little more than a distraction from our main business.'

The sorceress shook her head. 'I thought you would welcome the chance to protect yourself fully in this place. Especially after you were attacked within its confines so recently.'

The vampire shot her a look. He had no wish to be reminded of how the tower had been penetrated by the

lycanthrope boy Trey Laporte, and how he had lost Gwendolin at the hands of the teenager. He had almost killed the boy that day . . . almost, but not quite. The lycanthrope was a thorn in the vampire's side. Convinced by Caliban's brother that he was the creature spoken of in an ancient legend – the key figure in thwarting the vampire in his plans to rule the human realm – the boy had an annoying habit of turning up when least expected. And so far he *had* been responsible for frustrating the vampire. He shook his head. As soon as his current plans were underway, he would make it his personal mission to remove the boy forever and put paid to the ridiculous legend.

'Nevertheless, I feel it is taking up too much time,' the vampire replied. 'Gwendolin knew nothing of this "Shield".'

'That woman? Pah! She was an amateur. Little more than a dabbler in dark magic.'

'She managed to learn many things about Leroth. It was she who rediscovered most of its secrets. Maybe you think too little of her.' He paused, eyeing the sorceress. 'Or maybe too much of yourself.'

'Do not goad me, vampire. You would do well to remember who I am and what I am capable of.'

Caliban's eyes took on a terrifying aspect, and his nostrils flared as if he could scent the blood he so adored. The vampire disappeared suddenly, reappearing directly before the sorceress. The attack was unexpected and cruel. She gasped as he plunged his hand – the real one, not his blade-fingered prosthetic appendage – into her chest,

grasping her ancient heart – the heart that he had discovered and used to reanimate her. He gripped the ancient organ, squeezing it cruelly and eliciting a wail of agony from the sorceress. As his fingers squeezed, it was as if the outer glue that bound Helde together became unstuck – the trickle of insects turned into a torrent, and the sorceress seemed to melt before his eyes. Caliban leaned in, his face jammed up close to what was left of her face, and when he spoke it was in a cruel, fierce whisper.

'I am your *master*. I brought you back from the dead and I can just as easily return you there, for good. *You*,' he squeezed the heart a little harder and another terrifying screech filled the room, 'would do well to remember who *I* am and what *I* am capable of.'

He let go and stood back, watching as Helde's body slowly reformed before his eyes.

The sorceress dropped to her knees, her chest heaving as she sucked in huge breaths. Eventually she looked up at the vampire.

'You are right . . . master.' She spat out the last word. 'Forgive me. I forgot myself. It will not happen again.'

The vampire nodded. 'Good,' he said, turning away from her and walking back in the direction of his throne. He sat and imperiously raised a metal-bladed finger in the air. 'I will give you one more day to find this Shield. After that we will turn to the matter of creating our zombie army and proceed without the Shield if need be. In case you had forgotten, I plan to take over a world. Our unleashing of the

undead is the first step in achieving this, and I do not want you to be distracted. Do you understand me?'

'Perfectly.'

'Then let us hope that you can live up to *both* our expectations.'

Helde opened her mouth as if to say something, but thought better of it. Instead, she slowly pulled herself up off the floor, turned on her heel, and left the room.

1

Trey Laporte left the luxurious penthouse apartment where he lived with Tom and Alexa and Lucien, took the elevator to the ground floor and stepped out past the security guards at the front door into the bright daylight. He stopped and took a deep breath, glad to be outside and away from the stuffy, air-conditioned environment inside the converted warehouse building behind him. He considered sending Alexa a text to let her know he'd gone out (he'd left without telling anyone – something his guardian, Lucien, always frowned upon) but he needed some space and time to be alone with his thoughts. The apartment, in fact the entire building that housed Charron Enterprises Inc., was nothing short of chaotic at the moment. He turned to his right and began to walk, head down, lost in thought, moving in the direction of the City.

It was already hot outside. He'd spent the early morning in the gym, sparring with a Shadow Demon friend of his, hoping that the fight training would take his mind off things. It hadn't. He'd emerged bruised and battered, showered and decided to come out for this walk.

After about twenty minutes, with Docklands well behind him, he paused and turned his face towards the sun, closing

his eyes and enjoying its warmth. He ignored the pushing and jostling of the tourists who swarmed around him now that he was close to the Tower of London. It was half-term, and the usual throng of foreign visitors who flocked to this historic site were joined by parents and youngsters making the most of the sunshine in the capital city.

There was a tap on Trey's shoulder and he spun round, tense and alert. His heart hammered against his ribcage, and he eyed the oriental man in front of him, quickly scanning the area about him to see if he were a lone attacker or part of a larger group.

'*Sumimasen*,' the elderly man said, smiling and nodding in Trey's direction.

Trey was tightly wound, and the man seemed to sense this, his friendly expression momentarily turning to one of concern as he eyed the youngster. Then the old man nodded at the camera he was holding, arched an eyebrow, and gestured with it in the teenager's direction.

Trey slowly put out a hand, and the old man thrust the device into it and nodded again, before moving over to stand next to an elderly Japanese woman who was waiting patiently by the wall with the ancient castle behind her.

'*Arigatou gozaimasu*,' the man said with one last quick bow.

Trey took their picture, handed the camera back and hurried off, suddenly feeling rather foolish but unable to shake the feeling of vulnerability. Perhaps heading out hadn't been such a great idea.

As he walked he mused over what had just happened. He couldn't go on like this, seeing everything and everyone around him as a potential threat. He wasn't even able to go out for a walk in the sunshine without believing he might be attacked. How was he supposed to live like this? How was he ever supposed to enjoy himself and behave in a way any normal teenager might? He let out a long sigh. That was the problem. Trey couldn't live like a normal fifteen-year-old because he wasn't one. And he never would be.

He was sick of it all. Almost everything he'd once considered normal was now totally screwed up. Even time was out of whack. When he'd left the human realm to go and find Alexa and Philippa in the Netherworld nobody had thought to explain to him that the two realms were temporally misaligned and that upon returning, months, not days, had elapsed. He'd missed his favourite band in concert, and he'd paid a fortune for those tickets. No wonder Philippa had opted to go and live in Lucien's luxury villa in the Seychelles for a year – she'd had enough of the madness too.

Back at the apartment everyone was discussing Caliban and his plans. Lucien's frustration at not being able to locate his brother had diffused through the place, and it seemed to Trey as if everyone was running around in a state of frantic disorder, trying to second-guess the vampire's next move. It used to be that the apartment was a sanctuary away from the day-to-day business of the downstairs offices, which policed the movement of nether-creatures between the two

realms. But that had all gone out of the window since their return from the Netherworld, and now there was precious little time for anything else. Trey had come outside hoping to escape it all for a while, to relax a little, but his encounter with the Japanese tourist simply underlined how keyed up he was.

It wasn't just the activities back at the apartment that had Trey wound up, it was the reason behind them. The vampire Caliban was at large again, and if Lucien was right, he was somewhere in the human realm.

Trey squinted up at the sun once more. At least he was safe from attack by the psychopathic bloodsucker in the daylight. Of course, his minions were a different matter.

The teenager crossed the busy road, dodging the onrushing cars that blared their horns at him. He headed for the red, white and blue sign of Tower Hill station, thinking that he might take a tube train to Oxford Street. But at the last minute he veered away; the thought of pushing his way through the multitude of shoppers that would fill the busy streets there was the last thing he needed right now. Instead he turned towards the City, knowing that it would be quiet outside the working week.

His leg ached a little as he took a flight of stone steps down into a passage separating an ancient-looking church and a vast steel-and-glass office block. The wound he'd received at the Demon Games in the Netherworld was still a little tender, but it had healed exceptionally well and he knew that it was almost as good as new, despite the ugly

scar that marked him now. He'd suffered a facial injury at the Games too, but if he were honest he rather liked the pink line of scar tissue that ran through his right eyebrow. It gave him a rough, tough look. The scars were permanent. Unlike the wounds he suffered at the hands of humans, the wounds inflicted on him by other nether-creatures did not heal in the same way.

He had no idea where he was going. He walked, turning left or right whenever it took his fancy, and pretty soon he was lost among the tall buildings and near-empty streets. He didn't mind. He kept his eyes fixed on the section of pavement immediately before him, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his face to block out the outside world.

He stopped at a kerb and glanced up to check for cars despite the almost complete lack of traffic in this part of the city. A shop on the corner caught his eye. It was shut, the interior dark and uninviting, but the window packed full of comics and graphic novels looked interesting, so he approached it to take a look.

The lack of lighting inside the shop, coupled with the bright sunshine outside, made it difficult to see the display properly, and Trey was forced to make a visor out of his hands, curling them round his eyes and pressing them against the glass to get a proper look inside. He spotted a compilation book of one of his favourite Marvel characters, and he strained to see if it was one he already had or not. As he did so he got the uneasy feeling that he was being watched – a strange sixth sense that made the hairs on the

back of his neck bristle and a cold shiver run through him. He turned round, looking to see if he could locate the source of the uneasiness.

There was nobody in sight.

Get a grip, Trey, he told himself, remembering his earlier overreaction to the tourist. But the uneasy sense of being watched would not leave him, and lately Trey had learned not to ignore his gut feelings.

He quickly walked off to his right, pulling his hood back from his head now, not wanting his peripheral vision restricted. He sped up, turning left, then right, and entering a narrow street with rows of garages on one side and ugly, squat business premises on the other. At the end of the road he could see an arch in a brick wall that looked as if it led into a children's playground; brightly painted swings and slides were just visible through the gap. In the background beyond this appeared to be a high-rise block of flats. That feeling of being followed was stronger than ever. Trey started running in the direction of the park, quickly lengthening his stride until he was sprinting. Doing his best to ignore the pain in his knee, he ate up the ground in front of him. He burst through the narrow brick archway, skidding to a halt as he did so and taking up position to one side of the opening. He quickly glanced about him, relieved to find that the playground was empty and that a line of tall trees at the far end obscured the view of most of the windows in the flats. At the last second he decided to remove his trousers and sweatshirt, kicking off his trainers too so that

he stood there in nothing but his underwear, socks and a T-shirt.

Please God, don't let anyone look out now and see me standing in a children's play area in nothing but my pants!

It occurred to him that this could all be yet another episode of paranoia. He was losing it. He was imagining—

He stopped, holding his breath. Sure enough, Trey heard the sound of running footsteps approaching. That uneasy feeling he'd experienced at the bookshop was back, setting his nerves jangling and his heart thumping against his chest. He closed his eyes, praying that what he was about to do was the right thing.

He Changed.

The huge barrel-chested seven-foot werewolf that he now was crouched, and as his pursuer emerged through the bricked archway Trey threw himself forward, knocking whoever it was down to the ground. There was a loud 'Unfgh!' as they hit the small grassy mound on the other side of the opening. Trey was quickly on top of his quarry, pinning it down with his weight. He reached forward and pulled the hood back off its head.

But it was no demon beneath the hood. A pair of piercingly blue eyes stared out at him from behind a tangle of blonde hair.

Ella blew the hair away from her face, her annoyed expression quickly turning to amusement as she took in the astonished look on the werewolf's face.

'Hello, Trey,' she said.

*

When Trey had got over his shock at seeing Ella again, he pulled her back on to her feet. Growling an apology, he turned his back, returned to his human form and put his clothes back on. The ripped and ruined mess of his underwear and T-shirt were picked up and placed in a bin. Eventually he turned to look at Ella again and offered her an awkward smile.

'We should go somewhere and have a chat,' he suggested.

They found a little cafe where they could sit outside in the sunshine. He sat across the table from her, studying her as they waited for the waitress to fetch them their drinks. She was tall and attractive, with high cheekbones that made those penetrating blue eyes all the more startling. He remembered how, when they'd met for the first time in his Uncle Frank's house in Canada, he'd incorrectly suspected she wore coloured lenses. She had the same coloured eyes when she morphed into her white-furred werewolf form, which was unusual: most wolves lost their blue eyes as they grew from cubs to adults.

'What are you doing in London?' Trey asked.

Ella explained how her parents had refused to have anything more to do with her following her return from Canada. They reasoned that as she'd been stupid enough to run away with her playboy boyfriend there was no place for her back with them now that it had all gone wrong. She hadn't told them how she'd been lured there and deliberately

bitten by a werewolf pack's alpha leader, turning her into a lycanthrope too so that she had no choice but to stay there with him. How could she? She paused in her story with a sad smile and a shrug.

'But you know all about the Pack, and how it ended.' She gave him a strange look, pushing a strand of hair away from her eyes. When she continued it was in a lighter tone. 'So I decided to travel around Europe a bit and take in the sights. I found myself in London, remembered that you lived here, and made up my mind to track you down.'

There was something about her story that didn't quite ring true with Trey, but he dismissed the thought. He was glad to see her again, regardless of the truth behind why she was really here.

'So how did you find me?' he asked.

'I sensed you,' she said. She snorted a little and looked back at him with a puzzled expression. 'We're *werewolves*, Trey. Don't you *feel* it when there are others like us around?'

He frowned. 'No, I don't think I do. At least, not in the way you're suggesting. I think I sort of knew that you were around once you were close to me on the streets, but that's about it.' He shrugged. 'I guess I'm not your typical werewolf.'

There was a silence between them then. He realized she was staring at his sweatshirt, at the place where the talisman hung on a chain round his neck.

'Don't you miss it?' Ella said eventually.

'What?'

'The Pack. Don't you miss the feeling of . . . *togetherness*? Of belonging?'

Trey thought back to his time in Canada with the werewolf pack known as the LG78. He'd gone there to find his uncle, to try and come to terms with what he was and learn about his werewolf heritage. But instead his experiences had simply underlined the differences between him and other lycanthropes. He didn't fit in with the Pack. Because of the amulet he wore and because he was a true-blood werewolf – born of two, not one, lycanthrope parents – he would never be like them. He was different, and that difference had almost got him killed at the hands of the Pack leader, Jurgen. He looked at the girl sitting opposite him and smiled at her, remembering how she'd saved his life that day.

'I guess my experience of the Pack is slightly different from yours, Ella.'

She gave him that strange look again. 'Determined to be the lone wolf, is that it, Trey?'

She reached out for her coffee, and he caught a glimpse of the terrible scar on her arm that had resulted from her boyfriend's attack. The sight of it reminded him that she too was different. She hadn't been born a werewolf, and she'd also had to struggle to come to terms with what she'd become when she was deliberately bitten. He frowned, remembering that although his return from Canada still felt fairly recent, her own return had been some time ago

and that at least three full moons must have come and gone for her. She had no amulet round her neck to control her transformations when the moon was at its fullest. And there was no Pack to look out for her now during the Change to make sure she didn't go off on some murderous rampage.

'How have you coped with your full moons since you've been back?' Trey asked.

She let the question hang in the air between them. Eventually she shook her head, smiled and changed the subject. 'Look, I've got some time in London, and I thought that maybe you and I could hang out?'

Trey frowned. He was about to tell her that he was a little busy right now, when he stopped. Hadn't he just that morning bemoaned the fact that he never got the chance to act like a normal teenager? Hadn't he wondered if he would ever be able to hang around with friends in the very way Ella was suggesting now?

'OK. Yeah, that'd be nice,' he said.

'Do you live near here?'

'Not far.'

'Great! Maybe you could show me your place?'

Trey thought about the apartment, and how it was teeming with nether-creatures right now. Not to mention Lucien, Tom – Lucien's right-hand man, Hag the witch and Alexa. His heart did a little bump when he thought of Alexa: he hadn't told her about Ella, and he wasn't sure how she'd react to him turning up with her. He glanced back at Ella, who was still smiling. He returned the smile.

‘Yeah, sure. Why not?’

She stood up. ‘Great. Let’s go, shall we?’

‘Now? You want to go right now?’

‘Sure.’ She caught the worried look on his face. ‘Is now a bad time?’

Trey thought for a second before making up his mind. ‘No, not really. I suppose now is as good a time as any.’