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Opening extract from

Changeling: Demon Games

Written by

Steve Feasey

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Fifteen-year-old werewolf Trey Laporte has no one left to turn to . . .

The place:
The Netherworld

The missing:
Philippa Tipsbury – kidnapped in the Netherworld
Alexa Charron – brave, impetuous, possibly mad, has gone to rescue her
Lucien Charron – the reformed vampire has gone AWOL. He needs to discover why his bloodlust is back

The threats:
Molok – power-crazed demon lord; collector of humans; bloodthirsty master of the Demon Games
Caliban – ruthless power-seeking vampire; Trey's deadliest enemy

The mission:
Trey must leave behind the human realm and face his demons on their home turf – the stinking, terrifying Netherworld, where the last hereditary werewolf is the ultimate prey . . .

Bloodthirsty books by Steve Feasey

Changeling

Changeling: Dark Moon

Changeling: Blood Wolf

Changeling: Demon Games

Look out for the next spine-chilling ***Changeling*** *adventure coming soon*

STEVE FEASEY



DEMON GAMES

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



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For Tracey Berge,
a lover of books

PROLOGUE

Caliban strode out across a battleground which had, only hours before, been the scene of a terrible encounter between his forces and those of the now defeated demon lord Orfus. The dead and dying lay all around and he stepped over them, keen to find his general for an assessment of the cost of the battle.

Demon blood had almost clogged up the intricate workings of the vampire's prosthetic hand, and he quickly flexed the bladed fingers as he walked, trying to work the congealed black gore out of the joints. He spotted his general, Renik, talking to a Maug demon in the centre of the battlefield, and turned to make his way towards them. A demon at his feet, wearing the colours of his erstwhile enemy, groaned loudly. Without breaking stride Caliban swung the heavy mace which hung from a strap on his wrist and brought the weapon down on to the creature's head. It was an act of mercy – most of the surviving captives were at this very moment being tortured back at Caliban's encampment. The vampire considered this for a moment and put it down to the good mood that the victory had put him in.

'My lord,' Renik said, bowing her head at the sight of her master.

‘I congratulate you on your victory, Renik. Your forces fought with a ferocity and cruelty that was satisfying to watch.’

The younger vampire smiled, nodding towards the mace and the blood which covered Caliban’s clothes and hands. ‘It would appear that my lord was not satisfied with merely *watching*.’

Caliban looked down at the weapon and then back at his general. ‘I never was very good at delegating these matters. Besides, why should I miss out on all the fun?’

Renik smiled and shook her head.

‘What are our losses?’ Caliban asked, staring out at the sea of dead.

‘Not as bad as we anticipated. Orfus wasn’t prepared for a direct assault on his stronghold. His forces were weak and easy to defeat.’ The vampire general stopped and looked off to her right in the direction of the burning hills on the horizon. The hills of Nongroth had been alight and burning for as long as anyone could remember. Green flames licked at the sky from their peaks and the stench of their smoke filled the air for miles around. ‘Now there is only one demon lord standing in your way. Molok will not be so easy to overthrow, but he, like the others, has become complacent and lax in his rule. We should strike immediately, before he has time to strengthen his position.’

Caliban looked around him. Despite his general’s assurances about their losses, it was clear that the battle had taken its toll. If he pressed ahead with his plans to attack

Molok now, there was a chance he might be defeated. He angled his head a little to one side, running his tongue over his teeth and lips, tasting the blood there. 'What you say makes sense, and there is nothing I would like more than to advance and crush Molok. But I am not sure that we do not need to strengthen our own position before taking on the demon lord.' He held up a hand to stop his general from interrupting. 'We have waited for so long to get to this point. Three of the four ruling demon lords have now been defeated or have agreed to join us. Molok must wait. For a little while, at least.'

'But without Molok's seat on the ruling council, you will not have complete control.'

'I am aware of what I need to realize my plans, Renik.' Caliban stared at the general, defying her to answer him back.

He could not reveal his true reason for delaying the attack on the last, and biggest, fiefdom. He had won this battle through sheer strength; his forces had been too powerful to resist. But Molok was a different proposition. Cunning and guile, and – most importantly of all – magic would be essential in defeating his next opponent. And for that he needed a new sorceress – a sorceress that the Netherworld had thought was gone forever.

'Where is our captive being held?' Caliban asked.

'In our encampment, as you directed.'

The vampire smiled. When he'd been told that a battle-angel, one of the feared Arel, had been brought down by

a stray arrow he could not believe his good fortune. The spy had been sent to observe the battle, no doubt to report Caliban's victory or defeat back to his leader, Moriel. But a misdirected arrow, shot from the battlements of the fortress that Caliban's forces were attacking, had hit the creature. The magic it had been using to keep it hidden had failed, and it had plummeted to the ground, only to be captured by the vampire's troops.

'Go and prepare him for my arrival.' He hefted the mace in his hand. 'Today's bloodshed is not quite over yet.'

'Yes, my lord.' Renik bowed her head again to her commander before turning and walking off in the direction of the encampment.

Caliban watched her go. Like so many vampires, she was impetuous, believing that, having cheated death once, she was invincible and impervious to all threats. She was young by vampire standards, and her headstrong, fearless nature made her a great campaigner, leading her troops from the front and showing no mercy in the heat of battle. But Caliban knew that danger came in many forms. He looked down at his metal hand, turning it this way and that. In his mind he replayed the moment when the young werewolf had bitten through the flesh and bone, tearing the appendage loose with his huge and powerful jaws. Caliban could still feel the lycanthrope's teeth chiselling through his wrist, still feel the agony of that moment when the boy had foiled his attempt to kill his brother, Lucien.

The boy had made him remember the legend of Theiss.

A legend which foretold that a vampire would rise to power in the Netherworld. A legend which said only one creature would be capable of stopping him: a true-blood werewolf of exceptional power. If he wasn't completely convinced of it before, that moment when the boy had attacked him confirmed his suspicions. The teenager Trey Laporte was that creature.

A scream from the battlefield brought Caliban out of his reverie. The vampire shook his head as if to clear it. He would ensure that only one side of the prophecy was fulfilled. He would take control of this place, and remove the stifling restrictions that had been placed upon its citizens for so long. He would usurp the demon lord Molok, and in doing so he would assume complete control of the ruling council. Then he would govern the portals between this world and the human realm and the passage of creatures between the two.

But he would not allow the other side of the prophecy to be realized. And while Trey Laporte lived, there was always a possibility of that. He would kill the boy, and show the Netherworld that its new ruler cared nothing for ancient legends.

He looked in the direction of the burning hills of Nongroth and nodded to himself. For now, Molok could wait. Caliban had a sorceress to resurrect. And a battle-angel to destroy.

1

Trey Laporte entered the kitchen of the luxury Docklands apartment that was home to Charron Industrial Inc., the motley collection of family, staff, humans and nether-creatures dedicated to ensuring that the human realm was kept safe from the dark forces of the Netherworld. It was a little after nine o'clock – the time that Tom had asked him to be there. The sunlight pouring in through the huge glass doors made him wince and throw his hand up in front of his eyes, his eyelids narrowing to little more than wafer-thin slits. He mumbled his good-mornings and made his way over to the fridge. The room's other two occupants watched as he shuffled along, stifling a yawn with the back of one hand while reaching for the refrigerator door with the other.

When he finally turned round, a now open carton of orange juice held up to his lips, he nodded first at the tall Irishman standing beside the table, noting the inevitable steaming mug of tea in his hand, then at the other occupant of the room: a small boy. Judging from the size of him, Trey guessed that the youngster was no more than ten or eleven years old. The boy was sitting in the chair to Tom's left. Trey frowned – it was unusual for them to have visitors in the apartment, but he guessed that the boy might be

one of the housekeeper, Mrs Magilton's, many relatives – perhaps the precocious nephew she was always talking about.

Trey looked at the boy. He was short. Even sitting down and hunched up as he was it was obvious to the teenager that the visitor would hardly reach to his chest. He wore a hooded anorak which was zipped up to his chin, his hands stuffed deep inside its pockets. His hair was neatly combed, and held flat by some kind of gel that gave it a slick and greasy look. There was something slightly unsettling about the boy; even though he was clearly young, he had an old face, and he didn't blink once as he met Trey's stare with a bland and unreadable look of his own.

'Where is he then?' Trey asked Tom over the top of the drink carton.

'Who?' the Irishman replied.

Trey rolled his eyes. 'You know, the *person* that you were going to introduce me to.'

'The person that I was going to introduce you to?'

Trey frowned. He had to be careful what he said in front of Mrs Magilton's relative. He looked Tom in the eye before very deliberately looking at the visitor. 'Yes,' he hissed. 'You know . . .' He rolled his eyes again in frustration. 'The guide. The one that is supposed to be helping me in my . . .' he paused, 'forthcoming . . . er, *outing*.' He frowned to himself, wondering why Tom was being so obtuse and whether he had mistaken the time that the Irishman had asked him to meet. He lifted the drink carton to his lips

and was about to take another swig when the penny finally dropped.

Trey slowly lowered the drink, meeting the Irishman's amused look, before switching his eyes back to the boy sitting at the table.

'Trey, meet Dreck. Dreck, this is Trey Laporte,' Tom said, waving his mug in the general direction of them both.

The boy stood up and took a hand out of his pocket to give Trey a small wave, accompanied by a brief, nervous smile.

'Derek?'

'Dreck,' Tom corrected.

Trey shook his head, scanning Tom's face for any signs that the man might be joking.

'Him?' Trey said loudly. '*This* is supposed to be my guide through the Netherworld?'

The Irishman's only response was to take a loud slurp of tea.

'He's . . .' Trey paused. 'He's not exactly what I was expecting to help me battle the dark forces of the demon realm.' He nodded in the boy's direction. 'Nothing personal,' he said with a shrug.

When Dreck spoke, his voice perfectly matched his appearance. 'If it's any consolation, you aren't exactly what I was expecting either.'

Trey puffed out his cheeks. 'This *isn't* a joke, is it?'

''Fraid not,' Tom said, putting his mug back down on the table. 'Dreck was the best person in our organization that

we could find at such short notice.' The Irishman nodded down at the small boy, a warm smile on his face. 'To be honest, even if we'd had more time, which we do not, I think we'd have been hard pressed to find anyone as good. He knows the area of the Netherworld that you'll be going to like the back of his hand.'

'I'm guessing it's a very small area then,' Trey said.

'Actually it's not,' Dreck said, pulling himself up to his full height. 'And there are a lot of unpleasant characters there that I can help you avoid.' He raised his chin as if defying Trey to contradict him.

'Madness,' Trey said. He returned the juice to the fridge and crossed the room to stand in front of Dreck. He looked the youngster up and down before turning to address Tom.

'You scoured the organization for the ideal nether-creature to lead me through the Netherworld, and the best you could come up with was *that*?' He gestured in Dreck's direction. 'No offence, Tom, but I think there has been some mistake. Maybe you were meant to bring his dad up here or something?'

This time when the Irishman placed his mug on the table and turned to face the teenager Trey knew that he'd gone too far. Tom's eyes had taken on a stony look, and when he spoke it was through gritted teeth.

'Now you listen to me, young man. We've got our backs against the wall at the moment: Alexa's just upped and left for the Netherworld without so much as a by-your-leave. Heaven alone knows what's happened to Lucien – *weird*

is not the word for it – growing fangs again, behaving like . . . well, like a vampire!' He puffed out his cheeks and shook his head. 'You and I are all that's left at the moment. Now, I understand that you are eager to get into the Netherworld and start looking for her, I understand that every day we've had to wait since she went off is like an eternity to you, and I understand that your judgement and reasoning might be a little clouded as a result.' His face softened slightly, but it was still difficult for Trey to maintain eye contact with the man. 'Because of all that, I'm going to ignore the fact that you have just insulted my professionalism, but what I am unwilling to ignore is your rudeness.' He arched an eyebrow, waiting.

Trey took a deep breath, holding it for a moment before returning his attention to the diminutive figure standing silently by his side. 'I didn't mean to be rude.'

Tom remained silent, the eyebrow still held high, suggesting that more was required.

'And I'm sorry,' Trey mumbled.

Dreck nodded his acceptance.

Tom picked up his mug of tea. He took a quick sip, and when he spoke again his voice had its usual cheerful but businesslike tone.

'Well, shall we get to work? I think you two should start by getting properly acquainted. I'll make us all a fresh cup of tea and we—'

'Tom,' Trey interrupted his friend, 'is there any chance that you and I could have a word? In private.'

There was a slight pause while Tom considered this. ‘Of course. Excuse us a minute, please, Dreck.’ Tom walked through the door leading out of the kitchen, and Trey joined him in the lounge.

‘What *is* going on, Tom?’ Trey hissed.

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean, why have you assigned what appears to be a schoolboy?’ He glanced around the door, narrowing his eyes in Dreck’s direction. ‘What is he? Because I know he’s not what he appears to be.’

The Irishman reached out and placed a hand on Trey’s shoulder. When he spoke he sounded grave. ‘Look, Alexa went across with the Ashnon to try to rescue Philippa, so we have to assume that she is going to attempt to gain access to Molok’s citadel. I know how keen you are to get going, but we are having a very tough time finding anyone willing to go over at the moment.’

‘Why?’

‘Because there’s a war going on over there. Caliban’s power has grown to new heights. His talk of opening the portals to the human realm has attracted quite a following at a time when many of the Netherworld’s denizens see the demon lords as weak and ineffectual.’

‘But Caliban has been so quiet of late. You told me yourself that Gwendolin’s death had left him weakened.’

‘Quiet in the human realm. But very busy over there. The Netherworld is in a state of turmoil at the moment. It’s true that without a sorceress Caliban doesn’t have the access

to the human realm that he enjoyed when Gwendolin was alive. But that doesn't mean that he hasn't been able to take care of business in the Netherworld.'

Trey nodded, taking all this in. He gestured towards the kitchen. 'So . . . Dreck?' He shrugged his shoulders, silently asking the question.

'With all of that going on, it's been difficult to find anyone willing to lead someone like you through the Netherworld.'

'Someone like me?'

'Yes, Trey. Everyone knows Caliban is obsessed with you: that you're top of his hit list. And they know that anyone caught helping you in his backyard will be dealt with in no uncertain terms. If he is questioning the demon lords' right to rule, he must be confident in his power and support. That makes nether-creatures even more nervous than usual about going up against him.'

Trey thought about this. He knew that he'd been lucky not to have encountered the vampire recently, and everything that Tom had just said made perfect sense. Gwendolin's death had come at Trey's hands, and he doubted that this had elevated his position on the vampire's Christmas-card list. Knowing what he now did, Trey had little trouble in believing that Tom might have struggled to find him a willing volunteer. He hooked his head round the door frame and gave Dreck another look. When he looked back at Tom he puffed his cheeks out and shook his head. 'OK. Your opinion is that Derek—'

‘Dreck.’

‘Whatever his . . . *its* name is. Your opinion is that *that’s* our best chance?’

‘Yes, it is.’

Trey puffed out his cheeks again. ‘OK. I’ll go and be nice and make us some tea.’ He eyed his friend. ‘I hope that you’re right, Tom, because I’ve got a bad feeling about this.’