



The Changeling

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The Wormling III: The Changeling

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“The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN



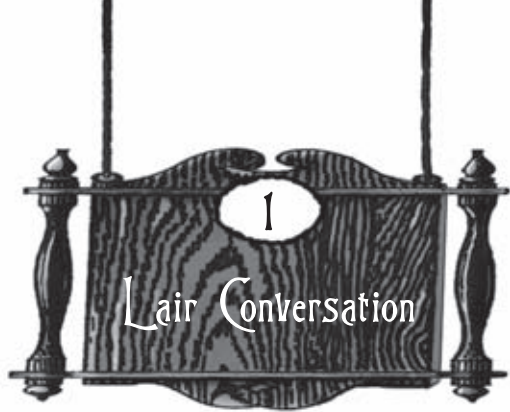
“An utterly fearless man is a far more dangerous comrade than a coward.”

HERMAN MELVILLE, *Moby Dick*



“Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.”

HELEN KELLER



Imagine—if you dare—the most hideous, spine-tingling music—screaming violins and long, ominous bass notes that shake the ground. A cacophony of horror is perfect for the scene we are about to describe. For in the darkness of a pungent room, though high and far from what we call earth, sits a being so revolting and gruesome that some have wished we would leave him out of our story. They urge us to shy away from scenes like this, but what would a story be without a villain? How could we measure the good of one character unless we compared it to the bad of another?

Without the being before us, we

would not understand the meaning of *putrid*, *malevolent*, *wicked*, or even *appalling*. No, here lies the very heart of our tale, for it is our hero's duty to defeat this foe, to utterly cleanse the world (both the visible and the invisible) of this powerful beast.

At the moment, all we can see is his scaly back, along with his twitching tail. His head bobs at something. Is he eating the flesh of an enemy? Might he be devouring our hero even now? Or picking meat from the bones of some trusted friend of our hero? Or more awful still, could he be torturing someone, trying to pry the whereabouts of our hero from him or her?

As we move into the lantern light in the corner, we clearly see the Dragon's pointed ears encrusted with wax, his long snout with nostrils dripping a gelatinous green substance. The Dragon sniffs it back, and the tongue darts in and out. The moving lips reveal stained, jagged teeth that could snap you in two. Reptilian eyes with dark slits in the centers glow with what seems like fascination or anticipation. And the massive jaw is working.

The body exudes evil power, and it is all we can do to stay in his presence—but stay we must. For he is not chewing or singing or talking to himself or doing anything superfluous. No, he is reading. But these are not words he can truly comprehend, as they are written for someone with a heart, with compassion.

The Dragon shudders and mutters, “The Son, the Son, the Son. That’s all you write about, isn’t it?” He clears his throat, and a squeak of fire escapes but does not damage the book.

“The Son shall have power and dominion?” he chortles. “No. Your prophecies will *not* come true, for your Son is gone, a coward cowering in some corner. He will never be all you want him to be.”

The Dragon snarls at a knock behind him and flips another page with a sharpened talon, trying in vain to tear a hole in the book. “What is it?”

Enter RHM, Reginald Handler Mephistopheles (or right-hand man, if you prefer), who would usurp this stinky throne if he could. The two converse in hushed tones, the gist of the vile talk and innuendo concerning our hero and that “We had him right where we wanted him!”

RHM bows his head. “Somehow he defeated your demon vipers and eluded you. But we still have the book—”

“He is getting stronger,” the Dragon roars, caring nothing for letting his underling finish a sentence. “Each time he eludes us he becomes more confident.”

“Not so strong that he could defeat you, sire.”

“Of course not. But if he comes to *believe* he can defeat me, he can harm our plan, all we’ve worked so hard to accomplish, all we mean to destroy.” The Dragon turns back to the book. “These words speak of a new day, countering the rise

of my kingdom. They suggest a model of the world under the Son's rule."

"Such words would instill a false hope in the people," RHM says. "That is why you have so wisely kept words from them."

"The fact is, *he* found this. The Wormling read it, and the words became part of him. He read far enough to breach the portal; we know that. It's to our advantage that the Son has no idea who he is."

"He can't be far from the castle," RHM says. He draws a circle on an aged map on the wall. "We think he is somewhere within this area, but this Watcher of his alerts him to our flyers, and the tracking device—"

"Has been destroyed. I know." The Dragon flips to the back of the book, brow furrowed as if struggling to grasp the meaning. "It says here—" he taps the page—"that their world will be cleansed by fire."

"Your plan all along, sire."

"Yes," he purrs. "Truly perfect. They will welcome this cleansing as for their own good, and we will strike them down." He turns a furtive eye toward his underling. "It also says that these beings are vulnerable to temptation."

RHM chuckles. "Right you are, sire."

The Dragon growls, and something flashes in his eyes. "Bring the Changeling. I have an important mission for him."

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Jerry B. Jenkins (jerryjenkins.com) is the writer of the Left Behind series. He owns the Jerry B. Jenkins Christian Writers Guild, an organization dedicated to mentoring aspiring authors. Former vice president for publishing for the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, he also served many years as editor of *Moody* magazine and is now Moody's writer-at-large.

His writing has appeared in publications as varied as *Reader's Digest*, *Parade*, *Guideposts*, in-flight magazines, and dozens of other periodicals. Jenkins's biographies include books with Billy Graham, Hank Aaron, Bill Gaither, Luis Palau, Walter Payton, Orel Hershiser, and Nolan Ryan, among many others. His books appear regularly on the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly* best-seller lists.

Jerry is also the writer of the nationally syndicated sports-story comic strip *Gil Thorp*, distributed to newspapers across the United States by Tribune Media Services.

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