Chapter 20

Your Changeling Song Takes Shape
in Shadowtime

Lily Hatfield was enjoying her time at Aunty Tia’s house. There were always cookies as long as she ate most of her lunch. She got to play with Haley every day, and though she missed her daddy, it was in a familiar way. Daddy worked a lot.

It did help that Uncle Nick reminded her a lot of daddy, except he was around more and talked to her about the shadow people. He was shy, like her sister Sarah was shy, but Lily could tell he liked them around. He was a good hugger, too. He treated every hug like it was special, which made her giggle.

What she really missed about home—besides her toys—was her shadow people. There weren’t any at Aunty Tia’s. There had been a *bunch* at Sam’s! She’d never seen so many shadow people. When she asked Uncle Nick, he told her that he’d worked with Tia to put up magic fences that kept the shadow people out.

She thought it was weird that he wanted to keep them out, but he’d explained that shadow people were just like regular people and not all of them were nice.

But *hers* were nice, and if they were here right now, she’d have someone to play dolls with. Her mommy was putting Sarah down for a nap. Haley had homework. Aunty Tia was working and Uncle Nick was helping her.

That left the werewolves. She peeked her head out the back gate. One of Brid’s brothers was pretending to read a book on the front porch. One of the quiet brothers--the one with a weird name. Sayer.

She liked Sayer. He didn’t talk to her like she was a baby.

He carefully dogeared his page. “What do you need, little one?”

“Do you know how to play dolls?”

He nodded solemnly. “I am an expert doll player.”

That made her smile.

“But you have to tell Haley you’re going to be out front. I can’t keep an eye out if I’m in the backyard.”

Lily pelted into the house, shouting into the kitchen where Haley sat studying her laptop screen. “*HeyHaleyI’mgoingoutfrontwithSayerokaybye*.”

Haley looked up, popped her earbud out and said, “What?”

But Lily was grabbing her dolls and running out front and wasn’t paying attention to Haley.

She set up her dolls on the porch around Sayer’s book, which she pretended was a table. Her dollies kept falling over. They weren’t good at sitting up. The necklace Aunty Tia had made for her kept falling forward and getting in her way as she leaned over the dollies, trying to move them around. The pouch kept hitting her favorite doll, Emma, right in the face. Lily slipped the necklace off, tucking it into Emma’s pocket.

Once she had the dolls settled, they played coffee shop, where she served drinks for Sayer and the dolls. Sayer took the game very seriously, pretending to walk up as different people, doing different voices and walks for all of them. He chose the silliest drink names and soon she couldn’t stop giggling.

Then Lily had the *best* idea. A few weeks ago, when her mom was getting coffee she saw a customer get a drink for her dog! Her mommy had explained that it was just a cup filled with whipped cream, which sounded much better to Lily than coffee anyway. She could do that now, and Sayer wouldn’t even have to pretend to be a dog. He could be a *real* dog!

She tried to explain it to him, though Sayer looked dubious.

“You want to make me a puppucino? Like they do at Starbucks?”

“Yes! Please, Sayer! Please? Daddy won’t let us get a dog until we’re older and I’ve always wanted one and this would be *just like* having one, so can we please?” She clasped her hands together and gave him big eyes, a trick that frequently worked on adults.

Sayer sighed. “Like I can say no to that. Okay, fine. I’ll just duck around the corner to change—”

Lily didn’t wait to hear the rest, she was already running into the house, heading right for the fridge. She had the door open, her hands on the can of whipped cream before Haley noticed her.

“Hey kiddo, what are you doing? Do you need a snack?”

“We’re making puppucinnos!” She squealed over her shoulder as she climbed up onto the counter using a step stool to grab a mug out of the cupboard.

“You’re doing what now?” Haley asked, blinking in confusion as she tried to track Lily as she darted around the room.

“Puppucinos!” She pelted for the door. “I have a customer waiting!’

She heard a shuffling sound as Haley got up from her seat at the table, but it was mostly lost in the noise of her running feet and the swinging of the kitchen door behind her.

When Lily got outside, Sayer was already waiting patiently. Lily froze, the mug and whipped cream in her hand. She hadn’t seen a lot of dogs, and she’d never seen one like Sayer. He was *big*. He looked kind of like pictures she’d seen of wolves, but different. He had reddish spots, like stains of blood, here and there on his fur. If she hadn’t known it was Sayer, she would have run away. Even knowing it *was* Sayer, was she froze, her heart beat a rapid flutter in her throat.

This made Sayer whine. He laid down, his nose in his paws, making himself seem smaller. Lily smiled with relief. It was still Sayer, he just *looked* scary. Lily already knew that things that looked scary sometimes weren’t, just like things that didn’t look scary sometimes *were*. The shadow people had taught her that.

Lily held up the cup. “I’ve got your drink, sir!” As she set it on the ground, she caught movement from the corner of her eye. Another dog trotted up. Smaller than Sayer, but similar looking, with red patches on white fur. Brid had been on guard with Sayer—this must be her.

“Another customer!” Lily beamed. “You’ll have to wait your turn.” She held the whipped cream can over the mug, pushing on the nozzle like she’d seen mommy do many times. It came out faster than she expected, making a harsh noise that startled her. She sprayed whipped cream over the grass, but some of it made it into the cup.

She heard a snort behind her. Haley had come out on the front porch to watch. “Smooth, kiddo. Very smooth.”

Brid barked, her mouth curled in a doggie grin.

“Be patient. Sayer is first.”

Sayer sniffed the cup dubiously, giving it a tentative lick.

“It’s good. I’ll show you.” Lily scooped up Emma and pointed the nozzle into her face. She was just about to give Emma a little taste when something crackled behind her, like static. The air around her—already chilly—got even colder.

Lily felt all the hairs on her arms stand on end, and her neck prickled.

She dropped the can of whipped cream.

She turned around slowly, her mouth dry, her heart a frightened rabbit in her chest. Faintly, as if it were coming from far away, she heard Haley gasp.

Then Lily saw it.

At first, her eyes couldn’t make sense of it.

Last month her mommy had read a lot of Halloween books to them. One of Sarah’s favorites was *Room on the Broom*, a funny story about a witch, her broom, and all the animals that wanted to take a ride. At one point something wants to eat them, but is scared away by a terrifying mud creature. In the story, the mud creature was really just the animals from the broom, standing on each other’s shoulders and covered with mud and sticks.

The thing in front of Lily looked like the mud creature, but made of shadows.

It…rippled when it moved, like when you throw a rock in a pond. Lily clutched Emma to her chest, her eyes wide as the thing surged forward.

It made…noises.

Singing noises, but wrong. So wrong. Lily broke into a sweat, unable to move now, eyes trained on the monster.

It scooped her up with sticky arms. She felt prickles, like little bites, anywhere the monster’s skin touched hers.

She tried to scream. No sound came out.

Haley was shouting, but from so far away. A wolf howled, the sound slicing through the noise.

Lily wanted to howl back, but all she could do was cry silently as she stared up into the face of the creature. Two liquid eyes stared back, the color of oil on pavement, beautiful darkness.

Slits where a nose should be.

A mouth curving around words Lily couldn’t understand. Her world narrowing the longer she stayed in the monster’s arms.

Hungry. It was *so hungry.*

The world shifted then, like they’d stepped through a doorway.

The sun blinked out.

The crisp colors of fall faded sharply, replaced by plum purples, midnight blues, and glorious fathomless black.

The colors of nighttime. Of eternity.

And Lily slipped into them, borne gently in the arms of the monster eating her powers bite by bite.

#

Creature hadn’t been able to find the cold star. It would blaze into existence, only to blink out a moment later.

Teasing.

 *Taunting*.

It made Creature angry. Why was the cold star so mean, so cruel?

 Didn’t it know how *hungry* Creature was? Starving, it was starving, and the cold star was mocking it.

 Creature howled in the darkness.

It needed more food for its nest. Why was this so hard?

At least it had the nest now. The cave Creature had found was perfect. Tucked back from the shadow road, in the towering trees of the forest, next to a sluggish stream that made weird music.

Something long ago had burrowed into the rock, making a home. Long gone. Creature’s now.

*Nest.*

*Home.*

Creature’s angry howls turned to hums of contentment. The cold star may be mocking creature, but at least Creature had something of its own now. A place to *be*.

The opening of the tunnel led back, twisting and turning, before entering into a large cavern. Crystals bloomed along the ceilings and sides, giving off a soft, constant light of gentle violet. Black sand lined the bottom, soft against Creature’s feet.

Creature flexed its feet into the sand, enjoying the welcome of its nest.

The new food lay limp in Creature’s arms. So small. The food came in so many different sizes. Creature wasn’t sure what that meant. This one was so little, it hardly seemed worth the effort.

But Creature took it anyway. Food was food.

It would need to be careful when it ate again with this one. Easy to take too much. It almost had.

Creature could still see the cold spark, the barest ember, deep in the new food’s body. Carefully, gently, Creature laid it down next to the other food.

More. It needed so much more than this.

Creature moved away, squatting by the entrance of the cavern. It needed to think.

How was the cold star hiding? How had this little morsel suddenly appeared, when before there had been nothing?

Creature wished it could talk to the food. Make it understand. Make it give away its secrets. Creature couldn’t make sense of the weird sounds it made. Creature had *tried*. The food mostly seemed to scream. Maybe it hadn’t learned to make words yet? Maybe it communicated a different way.

Creature could try to teach it. Make it learn.

Then once it learned, Creature could take its secrets. Find out where the other food was hiding.

When it had enough food, maybe Creature would go looking. Find others like itself. Creature couldn’t be alone. There had to be more like them.

It didn’t want to be alone.

Not when it could have a full nest. Creature understood the difference between full and empty. One didn’t exist without the other. So if the nest was empty now, it had the potential for full.

Creature just had to figure out how to make that happen.

It had a start now. It had the food. Maybe if it kept the food here in one place, Creature could draw others like it here! Make them come to Creature.

If it had the cold star, the draw would be stronger. Creature couldn’t imagine any of its kind ignoring the glow of the cold star.

Creature would be patient.

Creature would wait.

And in the meantime, the food would learn.