



Monster, Finder, Shifter

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My father's family had produced monster-finders for several generations. More monsters were being born than ever; our village didn't have enough finder power to track them all, or shaper power to abort or fix those the finders found, so many people had to offer their offspring to the Shadows.

My parents had seven children, in hopes that all of us would be monster-finders. None of us were monsters—my parents' and the village's good fortune. Three older brothers and a sister had passed threshold age without a flicker of finder talent. I, Bertram, was the fifth of my parents' children.

I woke one morning in my twelfth year feeling strange, shaky, and confused. Instead of fighting my siblings at the dining table to snatch a piece of Ma's breakfast bread, I snuck out the dog door in the back of the house.

Outside, the air was cool and damp, and smelled of earth and wood smoke. Spring had pushed green fingers up through winter's dead leaves. Birdcalls mixed with the rush of water chuckling past the stepping stones in the stream. The creek willows had already leafed out in curved green scimitars.

I crossed the creek to our neighbor Kalinda's house, a rounded hardclay building at the edge of a meadow. I had watched many storms under the overhang of its curved clay porch. Kalinda's one luxury—an oriole-nest swing—hung from that roof. Her husband had bought it for her from wandering traders. Somewhere, birds larger than people wove nests made of supple, wiry black withes, big enough to hide in, tight enough to block the wind.

Pa said people made the nests, and pretended birds had done it. He hadn't been inside the nest, hadn't touched the downy feathers carpeting the bottom, each as big as a hand.

Maybe monsters made nests like this, my older sister Ari whispered to me after all the lights had been blown out and our brothers and sisters were breathing slow in sleep. The monsters lived with the Shadows, far off in the forest to the northwest, a direction we called Not There. When the wind was right, sometimes we smelled faraway smoke from Not There, or heard music made by instruments none of us knew.

The nest was my favorite thinking place. That morning when I woke feeling strange, I slipped in through its narrow circle opening and huddled inside among the feathers to consider my state.

Kalinda took care of us when Ma was at the village bakery and Pa was monster-finding. Kalinda was nice to me, especially when my brothers Ethan, Dark, and Clay beat me up. Her wound salve was so cold it took the sting out of bruises and scrapes. She talked me out of feeling bad when my big sister Ari said cutting things to me. Kalinda let me sit in her nest swing anytime I liked; it was the only place I could hear myself think some days, there was so much racket at home.

Kalinda came out of her front door while I was curled up in the nest. "Hey, Bert. I just baked. Want some?" She held a plate of sundrop cookies in front of the round opening of the nest.

The shivers and shakes inside me ran like melted metal from my toes and fingers into my stomach, collecting into a hot, simmering ball. I looked at Kalinda. My eyes burned, and then I saw a strange shape curled inside her belly. Not a baby, exactly, but something, with head, torso, arms, and legs. Its tail wrapped around it like a spear-pointed rope, and soft spikes lay flat along its head.

I laid my hand on Kalinda's stomach. I hadn't even known she was pregnant.

"What are you doing, Bert?" She stepped back so my hand fell away.

It was too late. I knew my neighbor had a monster in her.

When monster-finders found monsters, they were supposed to notify the wifewatchers, who lived in a house on the central square, near the headwoman's house. Wifewatchers did tests to find out how much monster was in the embryo, and then the village council decided what to do next: whether to let the baby be born the way it was, or try to shift it so it was human and then let it be born, or whether there was not enough human in it to save.

A monster-finder located the monsters. Not all monster-finders had shaping powers to shift them.

If I told the wifewatchers I'd found a monster, Kalinda would have to stay in the Consideration House and be tested. The whole town would know.

Kalinda had carried two monsters before, and they had been stopped before they were born, too far from human to let live. Her husband had left her after the second one, searching for someone who could give him a live child.

No woman was allowed to stay pregnant if she had quickened three monsters. This was Kalinda's last chance.

"No, Bert," she whispered.

The longer she kept the baby, the worse it would be for her when she lost it.

"Don't tell anyone," Kalinda said.

"Everybody will know you're pregnant soon." The baby had a shape to her. She must have been inside Kalinda awhile to grow so real.

Kalinda took both my hands and laid them on her stomach. "How bad is it?"

I sensed, making sure what I had felt at first was right. "She has a tail. And head spikes."

She started crying. "Jat was the only one who would sleep with me, after I lost my first two. I thought this one would be different." She pressed her hands on top of mine. "Can you shift her, Bert? Don't let the watchers take her from me."

I felt the baby's shape in the palms of my hands, and I could see it, too. I had seen others shape monsters into humans. I wasn't sure how they did it. Pa hadn't trained me in the skills of monster-shaping, not knowing I'd get the talent.

"Please," said Kalinda. "Save her."

"I don't know how," I whispered.

She held my hands against her stomach. Tears ran down her face. She smelled like sundrop cookies fresh from the oven, and safety, and jasmine soap.

Blistering heat rose from my center. My hands sizzled with purpose. I thought, Warmth, go into Kalinda's baby and make it human.

Heat flowed out of my hands and into Kalinda's belly. She gasped and shuddered, but I sent the heat into her anyway. It flowed into the baby, flushed through her systems.

What is human? something in me asked, but I didn't know. A torso, neck, and head. Two arms, with one shoulder, elbow, and wrist each, two hands, each with four fingers and a thumb. Two legs, hips, knees, feet with five toes each. No tail. Hair on the head instead of spikes.

Shrink, tail, and put your pieces to work in the body so it will look human. Be human. Energy moved from me into Kalinda, until I was so tired I faded.

I woke in the nest, feathers and their slightly musty smell pressed against my cheek, a blanket over me. I had slept there before, so I wasn't surprised. I rubbed my eyes and peeked out the circle door toward the sky, dark, with scatterings of stars. I was so thirsty I wanted to drink a river, and my stomach had tied knots in itself clenching on things that weren't there.

I tried to get out of the nest, but it swayed wildly and made me queasy. I was so weak. It was so cold. I managed to eel over the nest's edge and fall on the porch, but then I lay there, too tired to get to my feet. I wondered whether I'd freeze before morning.

"Bert?" said a hoarse voice in the darkness.

I rolled my face toward the porch chairs. Kalinda's silhouette rose, knelt beside me. Her warm hand felt my forehead. She gathered me to her and carried me into her darkened house, laid me on the couch. Embers still glowed on the hearth. She fed the fire small sticks and draped a blanket over me.

"Are you all right?" I whispered when she came to me with a brown pottery mug whose contents steamed.

"I don't know." She propped me up with pillows and held the mug to my mouth. I sipped. Vegetable broth flavored with garlic. When I'd finished it, she set the mug on a table. She crossed her hands over her belly. "I feel strange and sick and different. What's inside me now?"

I took a couple breaths and tried to wake my new power. I touched her stomach. I didn't feel anything. "I don't know," I said. I pulled the blanket up over my head.

"Your ma was calling for you around supper time," Kalinda said presently. "I told her you'd come over here sick, and I'd take care of you."

"Thanks."

She rose, stood with her back to me. "Get some sleep." She went away.

I watched the flames until they died.

The scent of fresh breakfast bread woke me. I felt ravenous. I sat up. A fire burned again in the round clay fireplace, chasing the spring chill from the room. The warm orange and red rug on the floor reminded me I was at Kalinda's. I remembered the rest of yesterday, and felt sick again.

Kalinda came in and set a plate of buttered breakfast bread on the table next to me.

My fingers and toes tingled. Heat gathered in my belly.

"How are you?" Kalinda asked, her voice remote, her eyes not quite looking at me.

I put my hand on her belly and felt a baby there. No head spikes. No tail. "It's all right," I whispered. "She's human."

She sat beside me on the couch and wept.

We didn't find out until later that I'd hurt the inside of the baby's head. By then, she was a couple months old, hard set in who she was, beyond fixing, so they said. By then, I was training with Pa and other monster-finders and shapers to get my talents under control.

Once my older brothers found out I got the talent, they hit me more than ever. They were all training to be clay masons, and Ethan, especially, was an artist with clay; the flamelizards who cured the clay liked him well and did his bidding. Pa had been proud of him. Now I was Pa's favorite, and that drove all three brothers crazy. Also, I went to special school and got to skip a lot of the learning we all hated.

It took me months to figure out how to use my shifter talent on my oldest brother Dark so he'd stop hurting me. I had to use it again to stop him from telling the wifewatchers I was misusing my talent.

Nobody was supposed to be able to shift someone much beyond birth. That was what everybody said, anyway, and my teachers acted as though they believed it. But I figured out how to quiet Dark's voice, how to lock his hands against his thighs, how to shift his toes enough to make him trip every time he took a step.

The first time I did it was after he blacked my eye and made my nose bleed all over my favorite shirt. When he raised his hand to hit me again, shifter power rose in me and lashed out at him, and he fell to the floor, tears coming from his eyes, but no sound from his mouth. He clawed at his throat.

At first I was terrified. Power had gone out of me into my brother and done something I hadn't planned. This was nothing like the lessons I was learning at school.

I knelt beside Dark. I searched him with finder power and found that he was not dying.

Once I was sure he could breathe, I let Dark suffer until my nose stopped bleeding. We were alone. If Ma or Pa had been near, Dark wouldn't have hurt me so badly. Usually he hit me so the bruises were under my clothes, then taunted me into keeping them secret.

Finally Dark turned to me and clutched my arms. His eyes were wild. His mouth moved, and nothing came out. He gripped me so hard it hurt, and I pushed him away. My eye still stung, and blood was drying on my shirt.

He knelt in front of me and touched his forehead to the floor, and then I was frightened. I wasn't sure I could shift him back. It crashed down on me then, that this was the second time I'd sent out power without knowing how or what, and last time hadn't worked out so well. Plus, as old as he was, Dark was supposed to be unshiftable.

At last I laid my hands on his shoulders and tried to feel what was different about him. Then I sensed the tracks my power had left, a small, tight net across something in his throat. We hadn't had that body part in anatomy yet. I let shifter power reach out and pull the net away.

Dark gasped and fell back. "What did you do?" he demanded.

Siti, Kalinda's daughter, didn't speak. She made noises—moans, mostly, sometimes soft questioning sounds. She cried a lot. She grew like a normal child, walking at twelve months,

pulling things down from tables, putting everything in her mouth. She seemed to hear and see all right, but she didn't learn or remember. If she ate a berry one day that made her sick, she was just as likely to eat it again the next day. It made caring for her a chore. I took care of her when Kalinda needed rest.

One afternoon I had her with me in the think room, where I was studying a particular shift for babies who might be born with extra toes or fingers. The think room was a room we'd added to the house after my youngest sister was born. It was supposed to be a place where everybody could do things quietly, alone or together. Ethan designed it—rounded inside and out, the walls rough, warm, sandy clay, windows across from each other that could be opened or shut to train the breeze through or let in light, the outside black in winter to summon sun's heat, white in summer to reflect sun's glare, the floor a mash of soft seed cotton we changed every couple months. Ethan was too young to build it by himself, but he had his guild come and make it.

I had a pregnant dog and special permission to work her. Siti liked the dog. I had to keep Siti behind me while I worked so she didn't get mixed up in the shifts I was making inside the dog's belly.

Siti was curled up against my back when Dark came in. Most of the others stayed outside while I did my homework, but Dark didn't.

Dark said, "Why do you spend so much time with that idiot child?"

The dog had four puppies inside, very young yet, their paws just starting to bud fingers and toes. I sensed and traced the connections. I gave one of the puppies an extra toe on each front foot. The plasm was easy to shift in its current state. I waited, sensing all the systems inside the mother dog as they responded to my shift. Her breathing remained calm. The fluid in her stayed stable. I had shifted the puppy without hurting it, the mother, or the others.

I finally looked at Dark. Now that he knew I could hurt him and he couldn't stop me, our relationship had changed. Sometimes he was the only one I could talk to. "She's company," I said.

"Kalinda should put her out in the forest with the other monsters."

"She is not a monster," I said. I lifted one hand toward him, bent my fingers as though summoning my talent.

"All right, all right." He waved a hand to stop me. "Just wondering. You have to admit she isn't much good to anyone."

I stroked the air above the dog to loose her from the still state I had put her in. She sighed and lay quiet. I wondered if my shifting inside her felt good. She never ran from me the way practice animals ran from the other shifter students.

Siti tugged on my tunic. "Uh, uh, uh."

I turned, helped her stand. She was almost two now, and ran everywhere if I didn't slow her down. She often fell without someone's hand to hold. Ignoring Dark, I took Siti to the kitchen and got her a piece of dessert bread, soft and sweet from Ma's baking that morning. She put the whole thing in her mouth. Most fell out again. I had forgotten to break it into small pieces, and that started the familiar voice in my head: I was smarter than Siti. I should remember how to care for her. I had no business shifting anyone. All I did was destroy people. No one should trust me . . .

I cleaned up after her. While I knelt on the floor with a wet rag, giving myself a mental beating, she ran outside. I dropped the rag and ran after her. She wasn't anywhere I could see.

She was hiding. My first fear was always the stream. Siti could barely stay on her feet; I was afraid to let her near the water. I ran to the water and looked in the deepest pool, near the stepping stones across to her mother's house.

She was not in the pool, nor in the fast part of the stream where it rushed past small rocks. I quieted my panic and looked at the yard. The herb and vegetable garden was full of small green plants struggling up through the chill, empty of Siti.

I stood by the stream and reached for my skills. Siti was not a monster, but I should be able to sense her the way I could sense other humans.

I found her, crouched amid bushes in a little thicket of trees beside the house. When I picked her up, she clung to me. Her breathing was noisy, her face smeared with dusty tears.

"It's nothing," I said. I took her to the kitchen and washed her face. We went back to the think room, where I let her play with the dog. Dark had gone.

That day I held Siti's head in my hands and tried to sense my way into her brain. I did it almost every time I was with her. My dream was that I would figure out how to fix her brain. My teachers had all told me that one couldn't shift people after they were born, but I had proved them wrong with Dark. I was not going to work on Siti until I was sure of my ground, though.

I knew what Siti's brain looked like, if it was anything like the dead brains we studied in shifter anatomy classes. Between my hands it did not feel like that. I cupped a bowl of liquid light, with shafts of darkness and small storm systems moving through. The colors of light changed. When Siti was happy, the light was golden and warm. If she was upset, it got cold and blue. Other colors were harder for me to decode. Just now, with my hands holding her head, and her hands tangled in the dog's fur, her mind was alight with orange-yellow-gold glow. Three small dark lightning-spitting storms swept into the sky.

Could I still them? I thought quiet at the storms, and the clouds disintegrated a piece at a time, fading and lightening until they melted into the general gold of her mind.

I blinked out of shifter senses and looked down. Siti stared up into my face, her wide blue eyes blank of thought and response.

I wondered if she liked the storms. Maybe I should have left them alone.

I dropped back into the tranquil bowl of her mind and said, "Siti? Can you hear me?" Each word troubled the water with ripples of blue and green, melting into each other and interweaving.

Just then Ethan and Clay breezed into the think room, talking and tossing a small leather sand-sack back and forth. They saw us and stilled, and then Clay said, "What are you doing with that girl?"

These words shot through Siti's mind like blazing embers. She curled her arms and legs closer to her body.

"Is that what interests you, Bertram, a girl who can't resist you?" Ethan asked. His words were dark purple in Siti's mindscape. "She the only one who'll let you get close?"

An answering rage rose up. There was a girl my age in shifter class. Her name was Lane, and I liked her, but she never looked at me. She wouldn't partner with me, even though there were only five in our class. Sometimes I knew why she wouldn't look my way. I had made terrible mistakes. I'd never told anyone, and I was sure Kalinda hadn't either, but I thought finders ought to be able to tell about past mistakes just by looking at people. Sometimes I watched Lane chase after Rush, the oldest and most accomplished in our class, and knew she longed for one who didn't want her, the same way I longed for her.

I let go of Siti's head and pulled her into my lap, where I hugged her. She was hard-edged and awkward, one elbow against my stomach and the other in the soft flesh of my upper arm. She kicked me where it hurt, and I opened my arms.

"Brother, what have you done to her?" asked Ethan, and now he sounded truly alarmed.

"Nothing."

Siti ran to the chest where we kept toys for visiting children. She threw open the lid, pulled toys out, and crawled inside, closing the lid.

Ethan punched me in the arm. "What did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything! You're the ones who upset her!"

"How could we? She's an idiot, isn't she?"

"She doesn't like the sound of your voices."

"There's something unnatural in your fascination with that child," Ethan said, but Clay punched his shoulder and said, "Leave it! Who cares?" He stooped to pick up the toss-toy. "Let's go outside."

After they had left, I went to the toy chest and sat beside it, reached for Siti's thoughts. The storms fought each other, then slowed as time passed. Finally quiet weather was there again, but the sky had settled to pale blue instead of the yellow I interpreted as contentment or happiness.

"I'm going to open the lid now," I said. My words didn't disrupt her sky. So I lifted the lid.

She looked up at me, and her eyes were empty. Golden light filled her sky, though. She let me lift her and carry her home.

In shifter class the next day, the dead embryo-monster my teacher had given me sat in front of me unchanged while the rest of the class shifted their tiny corpses to look more human.

"Bertram!" said Neala, my teacher. I hadn't even noticed her approach. "What is wrong with you?"

"I didn't sleep well last night," I muttered. I cupped my hands near the tiny corpse before me and thought its feathered hands human. I could shift Dark: fingers, toes, voice, face, all those things could be shifted for a little while, as I liked, because they knew how they were supposed to go, and when I gave them permission to shift back, they returned to their original shapes. I knew my shifts were stretching them sideways, away from natural.

I couldn't do that to Siti's brain. It didn't know any other natural way than the way it already was. I had shifted it before it got set.

I turned the monster baby's four-toed, taloned bird feet into human feet. Things were much easier to shift after they were dead. The systems inside them didn't cling to familiar ways. Whatever animated them was gone.

"Good," said Neala. "Have you been practicing? You're so swift."

"Yes."

"Excellent. Work on the head."

My dead baby had head spikes and a bird's tail. It reminded me of Siti—before. I soothed the spikes from its head, but then I had to go and be sick.

"What's the matter with you?" Neala asked. She had followed me to the outhouse, opened the door while I was still retching.

"Teacher," I said. I left the outhouse and went to the bowl and pitcher by the back door of shifter school. I dipped water to rinse my mouth, poured some over my hands and soaped them.

"What kind of sickness have you brought to school?" Neala asked.

"It's in my head, not in my belly."

"What's wrong with your head?"

I looked toward the creek willows. "Do you know shifts for thoughts?" I asked.

Neala's voice had sharpened, and she gripped my upper arm so tightly it hurt. "Who have you been talking to?"

"No one! I have thoughts I wish I could shift. Is it possible?"

"It is forbidden." She loosened her hand. "What are your bad thoughts? What's troubling you, Bertram? How can one as young as you be so unhappy?"

I wished I could tell her. If the village elders knew what I had done to Siti before her birth, though, it would probably mean exile for Siti, and for me. Siti they might offer to the Shadows; I couldn't let her walk there alone. Before that happened I would take her and run. But where?

The nearest village was Yahara, two days' walk over the mountains, and I had heard people there were even stricter than they were here in Intil. They had no shifters. They let their monsters be born, and then disposed of them.

Beyond that, the nearest town was the city Pishtil, five days' walk, in the lowlands. All rumors of valley towns said they were people without gods or morals. I never wished to go there, though I knew Ethan and Dark pined to go to a trading fair in Rayal. They wanted to see more people in one day than we had seen in our lifetimes.

Neala put her hand on my shoulder and stared into me the way only a monster-finder could, looking for hidden structures and abnormalities. Her gaze probed through me like a spoon stirring through cooking noodles.

Was there a way to shift thoughts? Neala had asked me who I had talked to. Therefore, there must be someone I could talk to about it, if I only knew who.

"Come back to class," she said.

I rinsed my mouth and spat water on a weed, then followed her into the school, back to my dead child.

"Shift its skin color," she said.

The baby's skin was dead and gray. I reached for its ability to shift at my urging, and found only a few colors it could be. I nudged it toward the brownish pink of living skin. For that to happen, it needed to be breathing and have blood running through it. I asked for these things to happen.

"Bert!" my teacher cried, shaking my shoulder.

The embryo had been preserved in pickling juice after the mother gave it up. Elements and liquids were there; all they needed were persuasion and power to shift into something else. I summoned and persuaded. Shifts moved over and through the small dead thing until its systems restructured themselves, rekindled and reknit, remembered how they had worked before it died. There were missing connections because of the way I had already shifted the baby away from its nature. Its skin shifted to pink. Its heart beat. Breath moved in and out of it with a horrible rasping, gurgling in the nose.

I reached to see if its mind had come back, and caught a glimpse of black water, untroubled by current, before Neala slapped me and I fell to the floor, gasping.

"What did you do?" she screamed.

I stared at her and realized I was trembling and tired. I let my head drop, let darkness take me.

I woke in a room in the Consideration House. I had visited a cousin there once, before they took her child.

The room was made to comfort pregnant women. Every hard surface in it was covered with something soft. The blanket I lay under was finest lambswool, pale yellow. Orange mossweave carpeted the floor, and pale green and blue tapestries, threaded here and there with silver, draped the walls. The only windows were narrow slits near the ceiling, too high to show anything but sky. A round door in the far wall had no knob on it. Against the wall, a chamber pot.

A bowl of washwater, a mug of drinking water, and a loaf of bread waited on a table beside the bed. I sat up, washed, ate, drank.

I waited.

I examined the walls, lifted hangings to find bare clay behind them. I looked under the carpet: more clay. The door was wooden. I leaned against the door and searched it with shifter sense: thick wood, with a bolt of iron, its tongue in a piece of iron bolted to the wall with more iron. I sought lifesparks nearby and found no one.

I went back to the bed and lay with the blanket covering me. Dark would talk to them now, when I was locked up and couldn't stop him. They would cast me out or kill me.

Light moved across the floor into afternoon. Finally, when the sky was darkening, someone opened the door. I folded the blanket away from my face. The visitor was Alitala, the village listener. "We're ready to consider your case now," she said.

I got up and washed my face again, straightened my tunic, and followed her to the council chamber, a large round room whose roof opened to the sky when desired. Twilight sent fading light into the room, and fire bubbles clung to the walls. Five village elders, including Galowa, the headwoman, and seven deciders sat behind a table facing me. My family and Kalinda, four-year-old Siti by her side, stood against the back wall. Some other people were there as well.

"Who advocates for Bertram?" asked one of the elders.

Kalinda stepped forward, Siti clinging to her skirts. "I will," she said.

"Those who testify against him, step forward."

Neala, my teacher, came away from the back wall.

"State your case where Bertram can hear," said Galowa. She wore a white robe like the clothing in which we buried corpses. She was old and very wrinkled, but her black eyes were bright. "Bertram, you understand, we have heard and considered all charges before we brought you here."

I nodded. It sounded like the wifewatcher decision process.

"I charge that Bertram has rogue shifter power and can do more than he should be able to," Neala said. "I classify him a monster."

Kalinda said, "Bert has power and the will to do good. He is an asset to the village."

Neala turned on her. "Do you deny that Bert used his power unsupervised on your own child?"

Kalinda put her hand on Siti's head. "I do not deny it. I asked for Bert's help before he had been trained. He did the best he could."

Someone gasped. I didn't know who. I felt an unwinding inside me, the release, finally, of a secret clutched too close.

"Bertram made your daughter wrong-headed," said one of the elders.

"Bertram made my daughter human," Kalinda countered. "Before that, she was a monster." She picked Siti up and held her. Siti stared at the council, her eyes wide and blue. "I contend that Bert can do great things for us."

"Other charges have been placed. Step forward, Ethan Clayman."

Ethan walked in front of me, stood with his legs spread, his hands gripping the sides of his trousers.

"You have told this council of transgressions Bertram committed against family. Repeat them in his presence."

"What if he does something to me?" Ethan said. He glanced back at me with narrow eyes.

"We have the village's six most powerful shifters in the room to restrain him," said an elder.

I turned and looked at the people against the back wall, saw that some of them were shifters I had studied with, others shifters I admired.

"You will be protected," said the elder.

Ethan faced front again, so that I looked at the back of his tunic, his hunched shoulders, the untidy upstanding shock of hair at his crown. "He has done things to our brother Dark."

"Why does Dark not testify on his own behalf?"

"I don't know," said Ethan.

"Dark, step forward."

Dark unglued himself from the wall and walked up beside Ethan.

"Are you afraid of Bertram?" asked an elder.

"No," said Dark.

"Is it true he has used power on you against your will?"

"Sure, he used to," Dark said, and shrugged. "Not for a long time."

"What did he do?" asked one of the deciders.

"Made me listen."

Someone laughed, maybe Pa. Strange, drifty hope woke in me. I couldn't understand why Dark wasn't raging against me.

"That is not a proper answer," said the elder. "We need to know specifics. That he shifted someone your age is already an abomination. Tell us what he can do."

"I don't choose to," said Dark.

"Do you fear him?"

"Why should I? He's my brother."

"Give us the information we need to make a decision."

"Ask Bert. Ask this tattletale Ethan if you like. Leave Bert alone," Dark said. "He could hurt people bad if he wanted to, but he hasn't."

"Bertram Monster-Finder, step forward."

I went to stand beside Dark. He looped an arm over my shoulders. Strangeness moved through me.

"Bertram, what did you do to your brother?" asked the eldest.

"I stilled his voice," I said. "I shifted his hands and feet so he couldn't use them against me. I restored him when he promised to leave me alone."

"Could you do such things to any one of us?" she asked.

"I suppose I could," I said.

"Show us."

Dark unhooked his arm and held it out in front of him. "Change my hand," he said.

I couldn't believe he was so relaxed about this, that he would invite me to act on his body, after our history. Best, though, if I changed him, and not the eldest or anyone else.

I used shifter sense to understand everything about Dark's hand. He was right, I realized: I hadn't shifted anything about him in a year or more, and he had changed since then. He was stocky and solid now, and he hadn't teased me in a long time. His hand was larger, more muscled in different ways because of all the claywork he'd been doing. I learned its systems and structures, and then shifted. I gave him an extra finger, using material from all the rest of his hand so no one thing suffered much change. I had been practicing this shift on my unborn puppies, so it was easy, even connecting its control to his brain.

Dark turned his hand over, closed and opened his fingers. The new one worked in concert with the others. He curled it separately. "Nice," he said.

His original form agitated, wanting to reject the shift, but I quieted it. My brother held up his hand to show the council. No one spoke, until at last the eldest said, "Who knows when this has happened before?"

The listener stepped forward, and said, "Histories tell of one who could do this more than two hundred years ago, but that was before the age of monsters. She was considered a healer."

"Bertram, you may speak in your own defense," said the eldest.

"I'm trying to find a way to help Siti," I said. "I regret that I didn't know what I was doing when I shifted her."

"Would you take direction from this council and cease your explorations in late shifts?" she asked.

I looked at Siti. She came out from her mother's skirts and peered up at me. I knelt and she came to me. I touched her head. The lake was there, still and untroubled. Could I promise never to look for a way to help her? I couldn't.

I looked at the council members and shook my head.

"Go back to your room and await our decision," said the eldest.

After dinner at home that night, I asked Dark if he wanted to lose the extra finger. He said he liked it, and asked me to give him one on his other hand as well.

"What if they think it makes you a monster?" I asked.

He shook his head. "They won't. They'll know where it came from."

"I won't be here to change you back," I muttered.

He gripped my shoulder with his extra-fingered hand and shook me a little. "They've made a stupid choice," he whispered. Then he hugged my head against his chest. He smelled of smoke and earth and sweat and garlic. He smelled of home, and his heartbeat drummed slow and steady in my ear.

Then he held out his other hand, and I gripped it, studied it, and changed it.

"You're sure?" I asked when I had finished the intricate work of change.

He curled his fingers, uncurled them, and nodded.

I did the final settling of change, convincing his self that this was its own way, not something put on him by an outside force. He sighed, pressed his hands palm to palm, then gave me a one-armed hug and left.

Ma put together a pack for me, three mornings' worth of breakfast bread layered with chewing leaves, and lots of packets of the flat airless bread she baked for travelers. She added dried fruit and jerked meat, two tunics Ethan had outgrown, and a blanket from my own bed bay. All my books and one of my old toys. Ari gave me three sheets of blank paper. Ethan gave me a cookpot he had fired extra hard so it wouldn't break, and my younger sisters gave me a gourd water flask they had made in practical crafts class. Pa gave me a copy of a shifter's textbook I hadn't studied yet. Dark gave me a walking stick. Clay gave me an apple and a shrug.

My whole family went with me to the edge of Not There. The direction was my choice. The council had said I could go anywhere so long as it was away.

Ma took me to a rock at the edge of the clearing that was as far as any villager ever went in the direction of Not There. "This is a message place," she whispered. "Leave us notes here. If you need anything, ask, and we'll leave it here the next night."

Three curled pieces of paper lay in a narrow hole in the rock. Ma hid them in her apron pocket. "Someone comes every day," she whispered. "When you get there, ask for Sordi. He'll look out for you."

A wisp of smoke from Not There drifted into the clearing. It smelled like roasting meat. My mother kissed my forehead and sent me away with a push between my shoulder blades.

I walked slowly at first, on ground no one I knew had walked, between trees that looked much like those in our part of the forest. A faint track led the way.

Presently I heard music: drums, flutes, and fiddles, faint and wild, a tune that made my feet want to dance. I walked faster.

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