



The Shapeshifter  
(Flash Fiction, 590 Words)  
By Chris W. Vasques

Any person in this tavern could be the shapeshifter. One way or another, I will find this creature. They think I'm just a bartender, but that's the whole point. I don't raise suspicion when I'm pouring ale all night. My hands do the work of the innkeeper, but my eyes work for The Vigilant.

We have collected enough information to know the shapeshifter visits this place regularly. I'm just in the right place at the right time because shapeshifters can't make their transformation free of cost. No, they need human lifeforce to sustain their appearance. Otherwise, their shape begins to degrade. I've learned a lot about shapeshifters recently. In fact, this is my first time hunting one. Sure, I've hunted hundreds of creatures. Most of which, by all natural rights, shouldn't exist. I envy the general population and their blissful ignorance. If they knew what I knew, they'd live their lives in a manner that is far more cautious.

Tonight, I'm supposed to keep my eyes open for suspicious characters and try to get close enough to smell them. Sandrella says a shifter who is trying their hardest to hold shape without enough lifeforce is going to give off the smell of smoked bacon. I thought about asking why, but decided I'd rather not know the answer. Since we only have beef stew tonight, smelling bacon shouldn't be too much trouble. Hard to mistake carrots and potatoes with over-salted beef for pigskin. The other clue I am to be conscious of is that a shifter can only take your shape if you hold their talisman first. If anyone from this stinking mess of drunkards removes their necklace, my sniffing nose will be right behind their ear before they can even put it back on. I'm sure they'll be sweating, which should make the bacon smell stronger. Of course, I'm assuming that's how it works but I don't really know. Again, I didn't want to know.

This isn't the first time I've tried to catch the nasty thing in here. It has already happened twice before. Jenkera and Brummalda both went missing, each a week apart on the same night. Tonight is one week from the last disappearance, so the filthy beast is likely to strike again. I don't plan on letting this bastard slip away again, but we are a bit busy this evening. I keep getting distracted. Order after order. Look at this sorry jackal in front of me now. He can barely find the stool. I'm pouring two ales and ask what he's drinking. He doesn't answer.

We have two types of ale and three types of wine – it shouldn't be a difficult question. He looks like he recently crawled out of a sewer pit. I'm hoping I don't have to learn what his breath smells like, so I'm trying not to lean too close. I hand two ales to a customer at the far end of the bar and come back to the guy, ready to ask my question again, louder. I breathe in to get some power behind my voice and that's when I whiff it: smoked bacon.

My face and body freeze for a moment, then I try to act normal. I look down at his hand, he is holding a round metal talisman.

With wet hair plastered to his face, stuck like the bottom of a washtub, he holds it out to me and asks, "Have you ever seen something like this? I found it outside. Do you think it's worth anything?"