

Shifters of Every Stripe

When you write shifter stories, you have to decide how people become shapeshifters and what kinds of shapeshifters they can become. In some stories, a person might become practically any animal. In others, shifters are restricted to being werewolves. And there's everything in between!

First, I had to figure out where shifters came from. Were they natural? If so, how did it start? Why could some animals have shifter-forms and others not?

I like looking at traditional stories of the mythical beings that I write about, so I started digging through folklore to determine what kinds of human/animal shifters I might find in old stories. When people turned into birds or deer, it was normally due to some kind of curse, and it wasn't really controlled by the victim, so I ignored those, concentrating on the ones in which certain animals had human forms they could choose to take...or else humans had singular animal forms. What I found was that almost every culture has a tradition of a shape-shifting animal/human, and that the animal form was usually a predator. In the Far East, wise old foxes were thought to be able to take human shape, while in Africa, humans might turn into lions and hyenas. The exception was the Irish selkies, seals that the Irish thought could turn human.

So I decided to run with the idea of shifters being predators. In most of the stories, the shapeshifters were either animals who could transform into people, in which case they were usually trickster types, or else they were people who were cursed by a deity so that they turned into animals. I decided to go with this "curse" theory—except who would have a motivation for turning people into shifters, and why?

In my world, vampires are able to enslave any person by mixing their blood with the human's and feeding it to them. That meant that a vampire's servants were only loyal if another vampire didn't have physical access to them. So they have need for incorruptible servants or employees. Since so many more modern stories link shifters closely with vampires, often in the context of some feud, I decided that it would be cool if shifters had been created to be a race that wasn't able to be directly influenced by vampires, so their loyalty couldn't be easily corrupted. Who would have made them? The pseudo-magical elves, of course, who come from an extremely technologically advanced alien culture.

The vampires would only want predator types for bodyguards—the foxes being more like ninja. The rest of the back story for the shifters just fell into place, along with their feuds and their hang-ups. It allowed for the possibility that more shifters could be made, and I could explore what the differences would be between natural and artificial shifters, which led to the *Taken by the Panther* series.