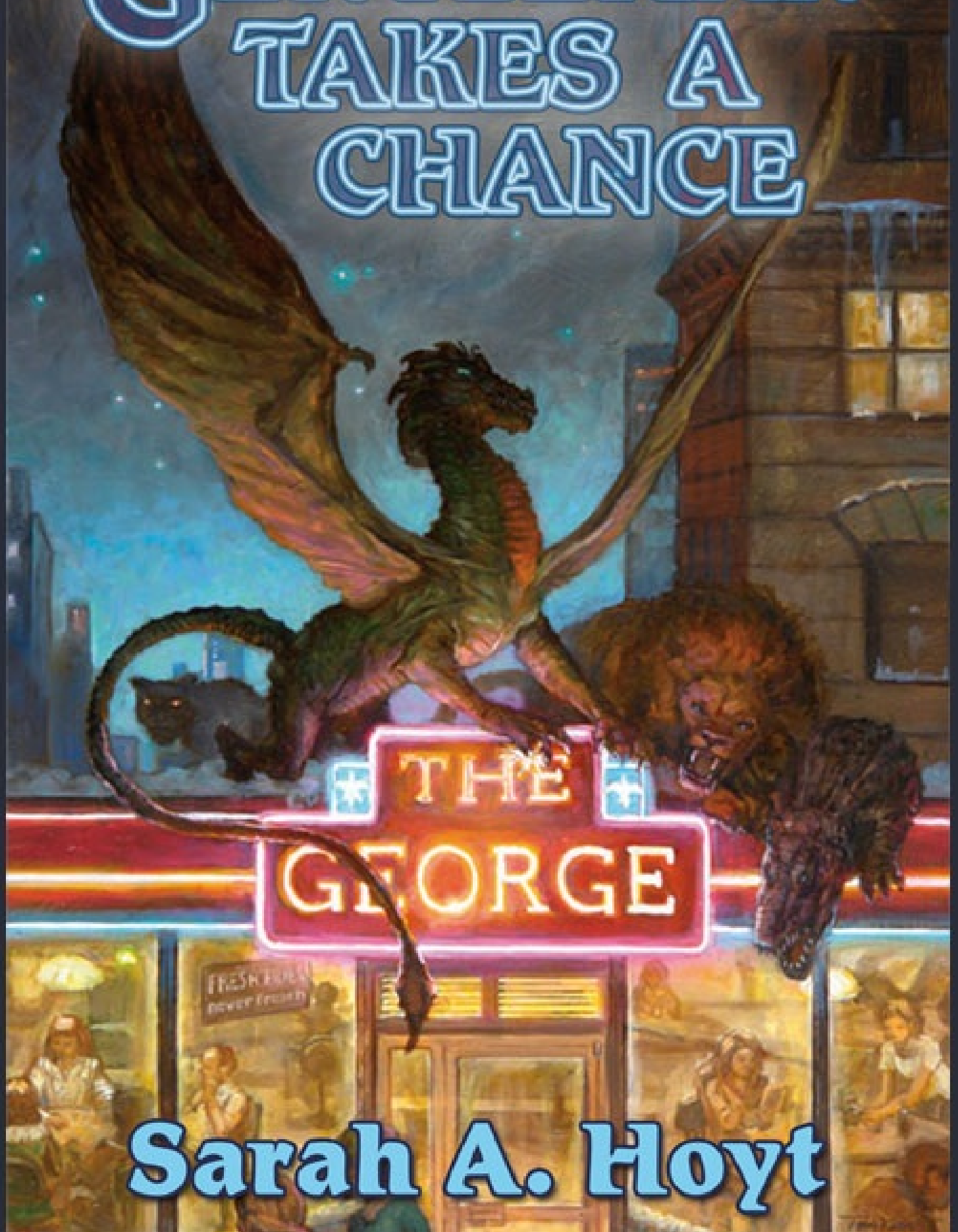


GENTLEMAN TAKES A CHANCE



Sarah A. Hoyt

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Draw One in the Dark
Gentleman Takes a Chance

From near and far the creatures gather—winged and hoofed, clawed and fanged, and armed with quick rending maws. Great hulking beasts appear that the world has not seen in uncounted ages: reptiles that crawled in great primeval swamps long before human foot trod the Earth; saber-toothed tigers and winged pterodactyls. And others: bears and apes; foxes and antelopes, all converge on a small hotel on the outskirts of Denver, as a snowstorm gathers over the Rocky Mountains.

Outside the hotel, some change shapes—a quick twist, a wrench of bone and flesh, and where the animals once were, there now stand men and women. Others fly into the room, through the open balcony door, before changing their shapes.

In there—in human form—they crowd together, massing, restive. Old and young, hirsute and elegant, they gather.

Outside the day dims as a roiling darkness of clouds obscures the sun. Inside the men and women who were—such a short time ago—beasts wait.

Then of a sudden *he* is there, though no one saw him shift shapes; no one saw him arrive.

He is not huge. At least not in his human form. A well formed man, of Mediterranean appearance with well-cut if somewhat long lanky dark hair, sensuous lips and a body that would not have looked out of place in a Roman temple. He appears to be in his middle years and wears his nakedness with the confidence of someone who feels protected in or out of clothes.

But it is his eyes that hold the assembly in check—dark eyes, intense and intent—that look at each of them in turn as though he knew not only any of their possible sins and crimes, but also their nameless, most intimate thoughts.

"Here," he says. "It is here. It is nearby."

"Here," another voice says.

"Nearby."

"So many dead. Shapeshifters. Dead."

"We can't let this stand," someone says.

"It won't stand," the leader of the group says. "We'll find those who killed the young ones of our kind. And we will kill them. The blood of our children calls to me for revenge. I've executed the murderers of our kin before and I will do so again."

"The deaths happened in Goldport, Colorado," a voice says from the crowd and a finger points. "That way."

"I will be there tomorrow," the leader of the meeting says. A tenseness about him indicates certainty and something else—an eagerness to kill again.

Kyrie Smith looked up at the ceiling as a sort of scraping bump came from the roof of the tiny workingman Victorian that she shared with her boyfriend, Tom Ormson. The sound reminded her of ships at high sea—of the shifting and knocking of wood under stress. How much snow was up there now? And how much could the roof withstand?

From the radio—high up on the shelf over the card table and two folding chairs that served as dining nook—came a high-pitched whistle, followed by a voice, "We interrupt this program to issue severe winter storm alert. All city facilities are closed and everyone who is not emergency and essential personnel is requested to stay indoors. Goldport Police Department is on cold reporting. Should your home become unsafe or should you believe that it will become unsafe, these are the public shelters available."

There followed a long list of public buildings and churches. Kyrie thought briefly that with the weather the police couldn't be on anything but cold reporting—icy in fact—though she knew very well they meant that any accidents should be reported later. Cold seemed such an apt adjective for what was happening outside.

Not that she anticipated needing shelter. The little Victorian cottage had been here for over a hundred years and presumably had survived massive snowstorms. But though it was only three p.m., with the scant light outside, the swirling darkness looked more like stormy midnight than the middle of the afternoon.

It was her first blizzard in Goldport, Colorado. She'd lived here for just over a year, but the last winter had been mild, sparing her one of the legendary Rocky Mountain blizzards. Which she wouldn't have minded so much, except for the fact that those blizzards grew ever larger in the tall tales of all her neighbors, acquaintances, and the regular diners at The George.

For the last week—while the weathermen screamed *incoming*—the clientele at The George had been evenly divided between those who'd say not a flake would fall and those who insisted they would all be buried in snow and ice and future generations would find them like so many Siberian mammoths buried in permafrost, the remains of their last souvlaki meal still in their stomachs.

Kyrie suppressed a shudder, gave a forceful stir to the bowl of cookie dough she held against her jean-clad hip, and told herself she was being very silly. It wasn't like her to have this sort of fanciful, almost superstitious fear. She'd like to think she had imagination enough, but she'd never had time to let it run riot.

She had been abandoned as a newborn at the door of a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, on Christmas Eve, and had lived in a succession of foster homes, having to fend for herself more often than not. She'd grown up slim and graceful, with the muscular body of a runner.

At almost twenty-two, she'd been an adult and on her own for about four years. She rarely stayed at a job for very long. What she had thought for many years were dreams of turning into a panther—and now knew was true shape-shifting—usually scared her away from any given place, job or relationship and had kept her moving before anyone became too close. She'd been afraid of being made to see a psychiatrist. She'd been afraid of being given antipsychotic drugs. Sane or not, she wanted to know her thoughts came from her own mind, not from some chemical. And her madness—as she thought it—hurt no one. It was just dreams.

For years she told herself she didn't miss people, or relationships, or those other things that seemed to be a given right of all other humans. She kept her own house and her own mind. And, until three months ago, when Tom had become her boyfriend and started subletting the enclosed porch at

the back of the house, she'd been lonely. Very lonely.

~~Then suddenly she'd had to believe she was a shifter. That the panther she dreamed of being was her other self. And that there were others like her. This had tossed her head first into a sea of new relationships, new ties.~~

This house and Tom were the closest thing she'd ever had to a family. Probably the closest thing he'd ever had to a family, too. Oh, he'd grown up with wealthy parents, she knew. He'd been raised in New York City by professional, well-to-do mom and dad. But that hadn't made them a family. It wasn't just that Tom's parents had divorced when he was very young. People might divorce and yet raise their children well and as a family. It was more that his mother had never cared again if Tom lived or died. And his father had left Tom to be raised by hired help, and only took notice of him when Tom got in some scrape and had to be bailed out—which he did regularly—possibly because it was the only time he got attention. And then, when Tom was sixteen, his father had walked in on him changing from a dragon to a human, and—horrified or scared—had thrown Tom out onto the streets of New York City in nothing but a robe.

After that Tom, too, had drifted aimlessly, living as he could, without anyone to rely on, without anywhere to call home. And now . . .

And now they lived together. And they were dating, presumably with a view to marriage, not that it had ever been mentioned. Of course, since Tom's father had bought the diner for them jointly, they were already part of a partnership.

And a touch of Tom's calloused hand could still set her heart aflutter, just like a sudden tender look from him, across the diner on a busy day, could make her feel as though she were melting from the inside out.

Still all their kisses and their caresses had an end. Tom always pulled back, before things went too far. Everyone in the diner—everyone who knew them—assumed that, since they dated and lived together, they were sleeping together as well. And Kyrie didn't know what to think. Tom said that he wanted to take it slow, to give them both time to establish a normal relationship before they became more intimate. And yet . . .

And yet sometimes, when he pulled back, she caught a hint of something in his eyes—distance and fear. Was he afraid he'd shift during lovemaking? It wasn't that unusual to shift under strong emotions, so that might be all it was. Or perhaps he'd realized he'd made a mistake and she was not whom he wanted?

A wave of protectiveness and of almost shocking possessiveness arose in her—the need to protect this, the one haven she'd found. Something—someone—must belong to her. And Tom was hers. Oh, not against his will. But hers to protect and hers to love.

Setting the bowl down, she pulled back her waistlong hair with a flour-covered hand, marring her carefully dyed-in Earth-tone pattern—that gave the impression of a tapestry whose lines shifted whenever she moved—with a broad streak of white. She frowned at the little door that led to the back porch where Tom was still asleep.

Would Tom be upset that she had turned off his alarm clock? They both worked the night shift at The George—a long night shift, often seven p.m. to seven a.m.—and he always set his alarm for two p.m. But she had turned it off because she thought there was no point going into the diner today and Tom might as well rest. The chances of their having enough customers to justify the money used in lighting and heating The George were very low. And even though it was only a few blocks away, Kyrie didn't want to drive in the storm howling outside. And she certainly didn't want to walk in it.

Whether Tom agreed with her was something else again. She looked down at the bowl of dough. A succession of never-ending foster homes had taught her that the easiest way of managing men was

by setting something sweet down in front of them. It tended to distract them long enough that they didn't remember to be angry.

Still, as she knelt down to rummage under the cabinet for her two baking sheets, she tensed at a sort of half-gasped cry from Tom's sleeping porch. Rising, she held the trays as a shield, and looked at the door into the enclosed back porch. Tom didn't cry out in his sleep. The house was barely large enough to swing a cat. If he sleep-screamed, she'd know by now.

He didn't yell again, but there was a deep sigh, and then the slap of his feet—swung over the side of the daybed—hitting the wooden floor of the sleeping porch. The sound was followed by others she knew well, from normal days. A confused mutter that, had she been close enough, would reveal itself as "What time is it?" followed by a cartoonlike sound of surprise, which was followed, in short order, by the sound of the back blind being pulled aside to allow him to look outside, and then by words she couldn't hear well enough to understand but which—from the tone—were definitely swearing.

Then Tom's bare feet padded towards the door between sleeping porch and kitchen. Kyrie, who in her short time of sharing the house with a male, had learned that if you appeared to be totally in command and quite sure you'd done the right thing, men—or at least Tom—were likely to go along with it, so she set the tray down on the card table at which they normally ate and started studiously setting little balls of cookie dough down on the tray, two inches apart.

Tom cleared his throat, and she looked up, to see him in the doorway. Her first thought—as always—was that, despite being all of five-six, he looked amazing, with pale skin, the color of antique ivory; glossy, curly black hair just long enough to brush his shoulders contrasted with intensely blue eyes like the sky on a perfect summer day, and generously drawn lips that just begged to be kissed. Her second thought was that the most sculpted chest in creation deserved better than to be encased in a baggy green T-shirt that read *Meddle you not in the affairs of dragons, for thou art crunchy and good with ketchup*. Even if she'd bought him the T-shirt. And the best ass in the tri-state area should not be hidden by flannel checker-pattern pajama pants in such virulent green and yellow they could give seizures to used car salesmen.

"I take it The George is closed?" Tom said, and raised his hand to rub at his forehead between his eyebrows.

He squinted as if he had a headache and there were heavy dark circles under his eyes. Granted, his skin as pale as Tom's bruised if you sneezed on it, but he didn't normally look like death warmed over. She wondered why he did now. "It's either closed now or it will be very soon. I called Anthony and he said it was pretty slow. He wanted to shut down the stoves and all, close and go home. So I told him it was fine. I know we could probably walk to The George but—"

"I looked out," he said. "We might very well not find The George in this. Blinding blizzard." He blinked as if realizing for the first time what she was doing. "Cookies?"

"Well . . . the radio said that there will be emergency shelters and I could only figure two reasons for it. Either the snow is going to be so heavy that the roof will collapse, or they're afraid we'll lose power. Can't do anything about roof collapsing. Not that tall. But I can preemptively bake cookies. Make the house warm."

He came closer, to stand on the other side of the little table. Though he was still squinting, as if the light hurt his eyes, his lips trembled on the edge of a smile. "And we get to eat the cookies too. Bonus."

"Make no assumptions, Mr. Ormson." She wagged an admonitory finger. "This is the first time I've baked cookies. They might very well taste like builder's cement."

His hand darted forward to the bowl and stole a lump of dough. Popping it in his mouth, he chewed appreciatively. "Not builder's cement. Raisin *and* chocolate chip?"

She shook her head and answered dolefully, "Rat droppings. The flour was so old, you see."

He nodded, equally serious. "Right. Well, I'll take a shower, and then we can see how rat droppings bake."

Down the hallway that led to the bathroom, she heard him open the door to the linen closet. Using a clean towel every day was one of those things she didn't seem able to break him of. But part of living together, she was learning, was picking your battles. This was one not worth fighting.

She heard him open the door to the bathroom as she put the cookie trays in the oven. She was setting the timer when she heard the shower start.

And then . . .

And then the sounds that came out of the bathroom became distinctly unfamiliar. They echoed off metal bending under high pressure and tile and masonry cracking, wrenching, subjected to forces the materials weren't designed for.

Her first thought was that the roof *had* caved in over the bathroom. But the sounds weren't quite right. There was this . . . scraping and shifting that seemed to be shoving against the walls. The cabinet over the fridge trembled, and the dishware inside it tinkled merrily.

Kyrie ran to the hallway and to the door of the bathroom.

"Tom?" she said and tried the handle. The handle rotated freely—well, not freely but loosely enough that the door clearly was not locked. And yet it wouldn't budge when she pushed at it. "Tom, are you in there?"

A growl and a hiss answered her.

The lion leapt across the entrance of the Goldport Undersea Adventure. He bounded across the next room, amid two rows of large tanks. The private company that had bought out the municipal aquarium had outfitted this room to look like a submarine's control room, with gauges and the sort of wheels that turn to activate pressure locks, and buttons and things. When the aquarium was open and functioning, the screens above the controls showed movies of underwater scenes in various bodies of water around the world.

Now dead and silent, with the aquarium closed due to inclement weather, they were just large, dark television screens. The whole building was empty except for a woman in the back office and the lion, who sniffed his way down the pretend mountain path that wound among tanks stocked with fish from the world over.

As he padded past the tank with piranhas, the lion growled softly, startling the exhibit of sea birds on an elevated area and causing them to fly up till they met with the net that kept them within their space.

The lion didn't care. He had picked up the scent he had been looking for. A sweetish, almost metallic scent. The smell of shapeshifters. He put nose to the ground and followed it, growling softly to himself, past the little suspension bridge with the artificial river underneath—momentarily disoriented where water had sprayed and diluted the scent. But the scent picked up on the other side of the bridge.

The lion couldn't think why the scent was important. There was a part of his mind—as if it were someone else, another mind, locked deep inside his brain—telling him the smell related to death and killing.

The lion didn't know why death or killing would be important, and he couldn't smell death in the air anyway. There was no decay, no blood. Just a smell of fish and water and chemicals, and the smell of people, many people, some of which had probably passed by days ago but left behind the olfactory trail of their passage.

Then there was the clear bright scent of a shapeshifter. Not that the lion knew what a shapeshifter was, or not really. Just that this was the scent he was seeking, the scent he must follow, deep into the broad chamber decorated with a cement chest and a hoard of plaster coins that his other mind remembered as unconvincingly painted to resemble gold.

The chamber was vast, with a tall ceiling lost in darkness. The lion crouched close to the ground and followed two trails of smell—or rather, one trail that wound itself around, in front of two vast tanks. Inside the tanks swam creatures the lion's inner mind told him were sharks. Large, with sharp, serrated teeth, they swam towards him, while he sniffed at the glass.

The lion paid them no more attention than he did the yellow tape that blocked one of the tanks and the service stairs, discreetly hidden behind some plastic fronds, leading back to the top of the tank. There was no smell there at all, and the lion didn't look at it. Instead, he turned to follow the interesting scent out of the chamber, towards the front of the aquarium.

And stopped when he heard a voice, coming from the opposite direction of where he had come. "Officer Trall?"

The words made the lion turn, giving something like a half-grunt under his breath, as he loped very fast back the way he had come. Very, very fast, his paws devouring the distance he had traversed so cautiously.

Steps followed him. Human steps. Steps in high heels—the inner voice told the lion. A woman.

The lion gave a soft, distracted roar as—the inner voice yelled to hide, to change, to do something—he leapt into a corner of the entrance chamber, around the side of the ticket booth, and into the narrow hallway that led to the bathrooms. He hit the door of the men's bathroom at a lope, and rolled into the room.

As he rolled he . . . shifted, his body twisting and writhing even as he tumbled, till a tall, muscular blond man landed, from a somersault, in the middle of the bathroom, by one of the closed stalls.

From outside the door, the voice called, "Officer Trall?"

"In here," the man who had been a lion answered, his voice shaking slightly. "Just a moment."

And it was just a moment, as he reached for his clothes—khaki pants and a loose-cut shirt that, with his mane of long, blond hair gave him the look of a surfer about to hit the waves—and slipped into them and his shoes with the practice of someone who changed clothes several times a day.

In fact, Officer Rafiel Trall of the Serious Crimes Unit of the Goldport Police Department, had clothes hidden all over town and in some of the neighboring towns as well. One thing shifting shape did—it ruined your wardrobe. Though he controlled himself—well enough during the day, with more difficulty at night—he still destroyed clothes so often that he'd developed a reputation as a ladies man throughout the department.

Every time he came back wearing yet another set of clothes, all his subordinates, from his secretary to the newest recruit, elbowed each other and giggled. Rafiel only wished his sex life were half as exciting as they thought it was. Not that he could complain, or not really. He dated his fair share of women. He just couldn't allow any of them to get close enough to see his . . . changes. So he had a lot of first and second dates and rarely a third.

He looked at himself in the mirror, frowning, as he combed his fingers through his hair. Receptionists, women officers, even the medical examiners and legal experts who had sporadic contact with the Goldport Police Department, all warned each other about him in whispers. He'd heard the words "fear of commitment" so often he felt like they were tattooed on his forehead. And it wasn't true. He'd commit in a minute. To any woman he knew would accept him and not freak out. In less than a minute to a woman like him, a shifter. Of his kind.

The thought of Kyrie came and went in his mind, a mix of longing and regret. No point thinking about it. That wasn't going to happen.

Instead, he opened the door—his relaxed smile in place as he met the aquarium employee who waited outside, a slightly worried look in her eyes. She was small and golden skinned, with straight black hair and the kind of curves that fit all in the right places. Her name was Lei Lani—which made him think of her as one of the Bond girls—and she was a marine biologist on some sort of inter-program loan from an aquarium in Hawaii.

Looking at her smile, it was easy to imagine her welcoming tourists in nothing but a grass skirt. Of course, thinking about that was as bad as thinking too much about her first name. Neither encouraged his good behavior.

"I'm sorry," Rafiel said. "One of those sudden stomach things."

"Ah. I was just checking, because I really should lock up and go home. I mean, everyone else has and I only stayed because I live so close by here."

"Yeah. How bad is it out?"

"Blinding. As I said, if I didn't live within walking distance, I'd have left long ago. I mean, I'm not even sure you should drive in this. Perhaps you should stay at my place till the weather improves."

Was that a seductive sparkle in her eye? Did Rafiel read it correctly? It wasn't that he wasn't tempted, but right now he had other things on his mind.

He shouldn't have been so reckless as to shift shapes while there was someone else in the building, but the hint of shifter scent he'd been able to pick up even with his human nose had forced him to check it out. After all, a shapeshifter at a crime scene could mean many things. The last time he'd picked it up, it had, in fact, meant that the shifters were the victims. But there was always the chance it meant the shifter he smelled was the killer. And a murder committed by shapeshifters, properly investigated, would out them as non-mythological. Which meant—if Rafiel knew how such things worked—that at best they'd all be studied within an inch of their lives. At worst . . . well . . . Rafiel was a policeman from a long line of policemen. He understood people would be scared of shifters. Not that he blamed them. There were some shifters that he was scared of himself. But the thing was, when people were terrified, they only ran away half the time. The other half . . . they attacked and killed the cause of their fear.

"I'll be okay. I have a four-wheel drive, and I've lived here all my life. This is not the first blizzard I've driven in," he said. He was still trying to process the input of the lion's nose. There had been a clear shifter scent trail throughout the aquarium. It had circled the shark area.

The shark area where, yesterday, a human arm had been found—still clutching a cell phone—inside a shark. The aquarium had been shut down—though the weather provided a good excuse for that. And the relevant area was isolated behind the yellow crime-scene tape. The dead man had been identified as a business traveler from California, staying in town for less than a week.

The question was—had he fallen in the tank or been pushed? And if he'd been pushed, was it a shifter who'd done the pushing?

The sound of the roar-hiss from the bathroom made Kyrie stop cold. Tom didn't—normally—roar or hiss. But the dragon that Tom shape-shifted into did.

She frowned at the door, trying to figure out how Tom could have become a dragon in the bathroom. And why. While Tom was a short human, as a dragon he was . . . well, he had to be at least . . . She tried to visualize Tom in his dragon form and groaned.

With wings extended, Tom had to be at least twenty feet from wing tip to wing tip and she was probably underestimating it. And he was at least twelve feet long and his main body was more than five feet wide, with big, powerful paws and a long, fleshy tail.

Now, your average bathroom might—for all she knew—be able to contain a dragon. But the bathroom in this house was not what anyone could call a normal bathroom. In fact in most other houses it would be a closet and not even a walk-in closet. It was maybe all of five feet by four feet—the kind of bathroom where you had to close the door before you could stand in front of the sink and brush your teeth. There was no way, no way at all, a dragon could fit in there.

"Tom," she yelled again, pounding on the door. "Tom! Please tell me you didn't turn into a dragon in the bathroom."

The sound that answered her was not Tom's voice—in fact, it resembled nothing so much as a distressed foghorn—but it carried with it a definite tone of apology and confusion.

"Right," Kyrie said, as she tried to push the door open. The problem, of course, was that the door opened inward. That meant to get in—or get Tom out—she must swing the door into the bathroom which was, in fact, already filled to capacity with dragon. The resistance she felt was some part of Tom's flesh refusing to give way.

She stopped pushing. She had no idea what had caused Tom to shift. Normally he only shifted involuntarily with the light of the moon on him and some additional source of distress working against his self-control. But what could make him shift, in the middle of a blizzard, in the bathroom?

She needed to get him to shift back. Now. Knowing why he shifted would help, but if she couldn't find out—and he wouldn't be able to answer questions very intelligibly—then she must get him to shift back by persuasion.

The door dated from the same time as the house—somewhere around the nineteenth century, when Goldport had been built from the wealth flowing from the gold and silver mines around the area. The wealth hadn't reached into this neighborhood of tiny houses—originally filled with workers brought from out East to build the mansions for the gold rush millionaires. Oh, the house was still far more solid than houses built today. The walls were lath and plaster or brick, instead of drywall. It was framed in heavy beams. But the doors—as she'd discovered when repairing hinges or locks before—were the cheapest, knottiest pine to be found in any time or place. One grade up from kindling. Further, to make their construction cheaper, they were not a solid panel, but a thicker cross-frame filled out with four veneer-thin panels.

Kyrie silently apologized for any injury she might do Tom, but she had to bring him out of this somehow. She went to the linen closet and wrapped her hand in a towel. Then she aimed at the thin pine panel and punched with all her strength.

The panel splintered down the middle and cracked at the sides. It remained in place, but only because it was held together by countless layers of paint. The dragon inside the bathroom made a noise like a foghorn, again.

Kyrie ignored the noise and, instead, started tearing at the door panel, pulling it out piece by

piece. When she had all the pieces out, she leaned in to look into the bathroom. Which was not as easy as she'd anticipated. First because it was dark in there. Whatever else the dragon had done in the shifting, he'd definitely broken the ceiling light fixture. Judging by a sound that evoked a romantic brook running through unspoiled mountains, he had also torn the plumbing apart.

Worse than that, what she was looking at resembled a nightmare by Escher, where nothing made any sense whatsoever. There were green scales, and she expected green scales, shading to blue in spots. But part of what she saw was the bluish-green underbelly of the dragon Tom shifted into. And right next to the missing panel, a claw protruded—huge and silvery, glinting like metal in the moonlight. Next to it was crammed what looked suspiciously like a bit of wing.

"Tom," she said, trying to sound reasonable, while speaking to a mass of scales that, she realized, was *pulsing* rapidly with the sort of panting rhythm a frightened person might breathe in. "Tom, shift back. You can't get out like this. Shift back."

The scales and wing and all slid around, scraping the door. The dragon moaned in distress. For a moment, the huge claw protruded through the opening, causing Kyrie to jump back, startled. When everything was done moving around, a dragon eye looked back at her through the opening. The tile balanced just above its brow ridge only made it look more pitiful.

The eye itself—huge and double-lidded and blue—except for size and the weird additional inner lids, was Tom's eye.

Kyrie spoke to Tom's eye. "Tom, please, you must shift. I understand there had to have been something to make you shift. But if you don't shift back now I can't get you out of there. And that bathroom is going to freeze."

She didn't need to be a building expert to know the tiny window into the bathroom had to be broken. The sudden moisture at her feet made her cringe. First, they were going to flood the house. And then they were going to freeze it. And it wasn't even her house. She rented it. Good thing she'd long ago resigned herself to the idea she'd never see the security deposit again. And good thing she didn't expect to ever be rich. After paying for these repairs, she'd be flat broke.

"Tom," she spoke as calmly as she could, though she felt her heart racing and was holding back on a strong impulse to shape-shift herself. She could feel it as her nails tried to lengthen into claws, as her muscles and bones attempted to change shape. She gritted her teeth and forced herself to remain human. To remain sane. Becoming a panther now would only add to the confusion. "Tom, you must shift back. I don't know why you shifted, but there is nothing that we can't face together. We've done before, remember?"

The eye blinked at her, panic still shining at the back of it.

"Look, breathe with me—slow, slow, slow." She forced her own breathing to a slow, steady rhythm. "Slow. Everything is safe. And if it isn't, you can't fight it while crammed in that bathroom. You must be human and come out of there first. Then we'll talk."

She spoke on so long that she almost lost track of what she was saying. It was all variations on a theme. The theme of being calm. Very, very calm. And shifting back.

Water was running under the door, covering the pine floor of the hallway in a thin, shimmering film, but she didn't dare move or stop talking. Was she having any effect? Tom's eye continued to glare at her, unblinking. She only knew he was alive because she could hear the dragon's breathing huffing in and out of huge lungs.

And then there was a sound like a sigh. Or at least a short intake of breath followed by a long, deep exhalation. The dragon flesh filling the broken part of the door trembled and wobbled. The distressed foghorn sounded again.

Other sounds followed—sounds Kyrie knew well enough and which she felt a great relief at. No

that she'd show her relief. She didn't want to startle Tom and stop the process. That was the last thing she wanted. Instead, she took deep, deep breaths, feeling Tom breathe with her, while muscles slid around with moist noises, and bones made sounds like cracking of knuckles writ large.

Tom sat there, on the soaked floor of the bathroom, on what remained of his ripped pajama pants and T-shirt. Plaster dusted his hair. His naked, muscular body showed a landscape of scratches and bruises.

He looked at her, mouth half open. Then he keened. It was neither crying, nor screaming—just a sound of long-held, pent-up frustration. He raised his knees and wrapped his arms around them, lowering his head and taking deep deliberate breaths.

She'd seen this before. She knew what it meant. He was fighting the urge to shift back. But he had it under control now. And he would be mortally embarrassed as soon as he had the time to be.

Kyrie did what any girlfriend—what any friend—could do under the circumstances. "Right," she said. "Don't go anywhere. I'm going to go turn off the water valve to the house."

Tom was mortally embarrassed. Once past the panic of the dragon and the heightened senses of the beast and the pain of being forced into what seemed to the dragon like a very tiny box—once he was himself—he didn't need to examine his surroundings to know the damage he had done.

The toilet was broken, the pieces shattered everywhere. The plumbing was torn apart. Faucets bent beyond recognition. Walls with their inner layer scraped off, in a way that was probably not structurally sound. The window was smashed—leaving jagged pieces of glass glinting in the frame. The shower enclosure destroyed. What had, less than half an hour ago, been a bathroom was now a disaster zone.

And Tom was sitting in the middle of it, looking up at Kyrie, who stared back in shock. She was very pale. No doubt toting up the expenses he had caused her. The lease was in her name. They'd be lucky not to get kicked out, even after they repaired the damages. And all because he couldn't control his shifting and had gotten scared by—

In that moment, staring openmouthed at Kyrie—who looked, as she always did, like a Greek goddess who had consented to come down from her pedestal and wear jeans and a T-shirt and a single red-feather earring—he remembered what had made him shift.

There had been a *voice* in his head. There had been a *voice*—echoing in his mind as clearly as though it were coming through his ears, which it wasn't. The voice had been of an entity known to Asian cultures as the Great Sky Dragon.

Whether he was really the father of all dragons as legend maintained, or not, Tom could not know. What he did know was that he was the leader of Asian triads in the west—that he ruthlessly murdered and stole and sold drugs and did what he had to do to keep his people safe and prosperous. And his people were only those who could shift into dragons. A specific kind of dragon. A kind Tom wasn't.

Their last meeting had brought Tom closer to his death than he ever cared to go. As close as he could go and still come back. And now he had pushed his way into Tom's head.

Tom shuddered as panic tried to establish itself and force him to shift again.

No, and no, and *no!* Nothing would be served by becoming a dragon. There were threats that the human brain was best suited to handling, no matter how much the puny human body might not be a match to claws and fangs and wings.

He heard himself make a sound—a half scream of frustration at the body he couldn't control—he lowered his head and concentrated on breathing. Just breathing.

In this state he only half heard Kyrie say something about the water valve. He heard her walk away as he controlled himself. And then he smelled burning. The cookies.

It was, strangely, a welcome relief from other thoughts. He got up. Everything hurt. He felt as though every fiber of his body had been bruised and as if all his bones had cracked, crazed, like plate exposed to high pressure. Groaning, holding on to walls and furniture, telling himself he didn't have time to be in pain, he didn't have time to heal; he padded through the soaked hallway to the kitchen where just the barest bit of water was making it over the little metal lip dividing the kitchen linoleum from the hallway wood flooring. His feet slipped as he hit the linoleum, but he balanced, and rushed to the oven—as much as he could rush without screaming. He remembered one of his nannies reading him the original story of "The Little Mermaid" and how, after the mermaid had traded her tail for legs every step she took would be like walking on knives. This felt like that, except the knives were also throughout his torso and down his arms, and small daggers seemed to stab through each of his fingers.

as he flexed them.

Oven mitts on, he pulled the tray of cookies out and set it atop the stove, then carefully turned the oven off. The cookies were less burnt than he'd expected—just looked like they'd gotten a suntan.

Right. He'd best make himself decent quickly. They had bigger trouble than the cookies, and there was absolutely no way he could take a shower now. But if he remembered correctly, when you turned off the water valve to a house, whatever water was in the pipes or in the heater remained. That might just be enough to, at the very least, get the grit of masonry off his skin and hair.

He limped to the hallway closet, full of purpose—because any purpose, and any thought was better than to think again of what had made him change or to acknowledge his pain—and grabbed a handful of washcloths and a towel. And he tried not to think of the pain. It would pass. He would be fine. Shifters healed very quickly. Particularly well-fed shifters.

He wet the washcloths at the faucet in the kitchen, and put soap in about half of them—then retreated with them and the towel back to his room.

Fortunately he was familiar with this sort of ad hoc washing. He'd had to do it often enough when he was living on the streets and only working occasional day jobs, between the ages of sixteen and twenty or so. Contrary to public perception, given a supply of paper towels and soap, it was possible to wash up—at least enough to not stink—at a stall in a public bathroom. It didn't, by any means, beat a long soak in a tub, or even a hurried shower, but it would do if it must. And clearly it must.

He was going through the motions of wiping down with soap, then wiping the soap off, noting that the soap stung in a high number of abraded places, and that just touching his skin brought on a pain on the edge of unbearable, when he heard the back door close and Kyrie call tentatively, "Tom?"

"In here," he said. "I'll be out in a moment."

She didn't come in. Their rules for when they were allowed to see each other naked wouldn't make sense to anyone else. They didn't even make any *rational* sense to Tom himself. But they made *emotional* sense.

Because of the shifting, they had seen each other naked long before they had a relationship, and often saw each other naked in all sorts of situations. But while human and not coming off from a shifter, they respected each other's privacy as much as possible. Kyrie would no more walk into his room while she knew he was naked than he would walk in on her in the shower. Oh, yes, they were dating. They were in love, or at least—Tom smiled to himself, as he extracted as much masonry as possible from his long dark hair—he thought so. His opinion might be insufficient, since he'd never had any experience with the emotion before. Still, he would give his left hand, or wing, or claw for Kyrie and she'd proven often enough she'd do the equivalent for him.

But they were both intensely private people. And neither of them had experience of relationship before. So they were taking it slow and trying to establish the feelings and the boundaries before becoming more physical. Not the least because neither of them was sure how the beasts they shifted into would react to *more physical*. The prospect of becoming dragon and panther during sex could be regarded as either hilarious or terrifying, depending on how macabre one's sense of humor.

Having finished his Spartan wash, he dried with the towel, tied his hair back—after rummaging for the elastic in the bedclothes—and slipped on a pair of jeans and a loose white T-shirt. Remembering the water in the hallway, he put on socks and his leather boots and came out of his room to find Kyrie coming in too, from the other side, duct tape in hand.

"I wiped the water from the floor in the hallway and sealed the bathroom," she said, matter of fact. "So the cold doesn't come into the rest of the house." Then looking at him, she smiled. "You cleaned up."

He felt himself blush that she was surprised he'd take the trouble to clean up. "I didn't think

masonry was the in look this winter."

She nodded solemnly, stowing the duct tape in the drawer under the coffee maker. "There's coffee," she said, while pouring herself a cup. "I'd started it when—" She stopped. "Thank you for saving the cookies."

He bit back the obvious answer: "You don't need to put on the politeness. No need to thank me, since I was the one who made you forget them." Most of his life, long before he'd found out he was a shifter, at sixteen, he'd been giving the answer guaranteed to infuriate people and rejoicing in getting reaction. Any reaction. He didn't know why. That was just the way he was.

It was tempting to say that he'd become a hostile bundle of aggression because both his parents were busy professionals, too busy in fact to notice their son existed. Tempting and, no doubt, some psychologist would say it in all seriousness.

But Tom didn't believe in psychology any more than he believed in any other organized religion. And at some point a grown-up had to stop blaming his parents for his quirks. Perhaps that was what had set him off . . . perhaps not. Perhaps some accidental genetic combination had caused him to be born hostile and contrary. But three months ago, when he'd moved in with Kyrie, he'd decided that habit stopped and quickly too. So now he bit his tongue and sighed. "They are a little too tanned."

She smiled back, as if she knew of the averted response and appreciated his effort. "No matter. Still edible." Picking up a cookie, she sat down.

He got himself coffee. Her whole attitude said *we have to talk*, and he supposed they did. He used the time of filling the cup and sugaring his coffee to think of what he could say that would mitigate what he had just done.

I'll pay for it was obvious, though he had exactly zero clue how. All the money he had—just like all the money Kyrie had—was part shares in The George. And, unlike what he would have imagined before getting into it, profits and debts weren't as clear-cut as they seemed. His father—in an impulse for atonement that could not be gainsaid—had bought them the building and equipment for The George. That much they had. But it wasn't money. You couldn't walk into the mall with five bricks and buy a T-shirt. And there was no way he could swap one of the industrial freezers for the repair bill on the bathroom. For one, because they needed the freezers.

Which was the issue with the money. The George was doing well. Money came in every night and day. The few upgrades he and Kyrie had been able to afford here and there—a coat of paint, new Formica on the tables, re-covering the vinyl booths, a new stove—were drawing in a better clientele, too. In addition to the manual laborers and students who had always drifted to The George, they now got young professionals from the gentrified area a few blocks away, amused at the dragon theme of the restaurant and intrigued by Tom's culinary experimentation.

They were—from what Tom understood of the raised eyebrows of his accountant, who was a man of few words—doing very well indeed, having unwittingly become the spearheads of the push for gentrification in *that* area of Fairfax. But the money that came in went out again very quickly, and the improvements fueled other improvements. There were waiters to pay and Anthony's salary had been raised since he'd become manager. To keep the better clientele, Tom had bought new silverware and dishes and improved the quality of everything from the paper goods to the coffee mugs. His own self-respect as a cook had forced him to buy better quality meat.

His father—when they talked—assured him all this would eventually pay off and while the cycle seemed fruitless and inane right now, eventually the money coming in would outstrip the need for improvements and Tom and Kyrie would find themselves wealthy or close to it. Today was not the eve of that day, though. Their separate bank accounts, if pooled, would net them maybe two thousand dollars. On which they had to live for the month. Not enough for this type of repair.

He could, of course, ask his father for help, but just the idea of it was enough to give him heartburn. ~~He'd solved—he thought—his life-long struggle with his father.~~ While his father was not the best of parents, neither was Tom the best of sons. But still . . . Edward Ormson had forced his sixteen-year-old son out of the house at gunpoint onto the streets of New York City on the day he found that Tom shifted shape into a dragon.

Tom could forgive, but he could not forget. He'd accepted the diner, but even that had smarted, and he'd only accepted it because he could tell how much Kyrie wanted it. And he'd talk to his father and be civil when he called because the man was trying his best to establish a relationship. And Tom was not so flush with friends that he could turn down anyone willing to befriend him. Even if it was his own father.

But he'd be damned if he was going to go cadging his father for money. He'd be damned if he'd go back to his father every time he found himself in a scrape. He'd be damned if he gave his father reason to think of him—ever again—as his fucked-up son.

He'd rather live on the streets, he thought decisively, as he made his way back to the table and sat down, cup in hand. He'd done it before.

He looked up, frowning slightly, to meet Kyrie's attentive gaze on him. She was examining his face—probably for signs of the madness that had caused him to shift in the bathroom.

When she saw him looking, she smiled. "Have a cookie."

What Kyrie wanted to know was why he'd shifted. But she was terrified that if she asked him, he'd feel the need the shift again. After all, whatever it was had to be powerful enough to cause a visceral panic reaction. Thinking about it might bring on another shift.

His eyebrows lowered a little and as he took a bite of the cookie, he did it as if it required a large amount of concentration. When he looked back at her, his gaze remained worried and more than a little bit confused.

"I figured," he said, his tone slow and calculating. "I might be able to get a loan. But I don't know how because I don't want to mortgage The George because that's yours too and, you know—"

"What?" She hadn't meant to interrupt, but the last thing she'd expected was for him to start talking money.

"The bathroom," he said, gesturing airily.

"Oh, that. I looked at the walls and they seem to be fine. You just peeled the tile off and destroyed the plumbing and appliances. Cosmetic stuff. We'll find a handyman. Place is solidly built. She shrugged. "Yeah, we'll borrow if we have to. We could do it all ourselves, you know, with a good how-to manual, but we don't have that much free time and a functioning bathroom is kind of a necessity." Seeing him open his mouth, she went on, redirecting the conversation, "Which is why I think we should go to The George."

He blinked at her. "What?" he said, his tone exactly matching her earlier one as, clearly, the gears of his mind had been grinding at a different place.

"I think we should go to The George until the blizzard is past and we get the bathroom repaired. While I don't like the idea of driving in this, we'll have a bathroom at The George. I mean—no place to take showers, though we can probably get a room at the bed-and-breakfast next door for that—but we'll at least have a place to go to the bathroom. The weather—not to mention the neighbors—kind of precludes just peeing in the yard."

Her absurd words managed to bring a smile to his lips, but it vanished very fast. "Yeah. We'll have to go."

"Yes. I know we could just stay at the bed-and-breakfast, but if we're going to be that close to The George, we might as well open too. I'm sure you don't want to spend however long in just a tiny rented room. And we might get a few diners, and it might just pay for that opening. And the bed-and-breakfast. I mean, we could go to one of the emergency shelters, but you and me and an enclosed space with a lot of people . . ." She shrugged. Given what had just happened to him, in the bathroom, she didn't need to draw pictures of a dragon and a panther rampaging amid distressed refugees.

He nodded and took a sip of the coffee. "Okay," he said. "I'll take a sleeping bag. In case we rent a room with only one bed." He got up and headed for his sleeping porch, clearly intent on packing. "And my laptop. Perhaps I can do some of the paperwork that's been accumulating."

"Tom . . ." She didn't want to ask, but she'd have to. "Why the shift? Was it the storm? You don't normally shift during the day, much less—" She stopped.

He'd turned around, a hand going up to his head, as if to pull back hair that didn't need it—a habit of his when he was nervous. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he swallowed. He sighed. For just a moment, it seemed to her, he was concentrating very hard on not shifting. "It was the Great Sky Dragon," he said. "I . . . I don't know how to put this without sounding like a science fiction story, but I heard him in my mind. Without sound." He took a deep breath like a drowning man who has succeeded in getting his head above water for a moment. "I know I sound crazy, but . . . He was there

She shrugged at him. They were people who could—and did—change into animal shapes without wishing to. And still, he was afraid she'd think having experienced telepathy made him sound crazy.

"So you heard him in your mind," she said. "Did he threaten you?"

Tom shook his head. "No, that was the odd part. He warned me. But it wasn't a threat. He said someone he called the Ancient Ones wanted to kill us. That we should beware."

"Right. We'll stay out of retirement homes," Kyrie said, and immediately after, "I'm sorry. It isn't funny. But why should he warn us now, when he went out of his way to almost kill you before?"

Tom shook his head and looked startlingly naked and vulnerable—as if it cost him something to admit this. "I don't know."

The phone rang.

For an intense panic-filled moment, Tom thought it would be the Great Sky Dragon calling him to repeat the vague warnings he'd spoken within Tom's mind. It took a deep breath and remembering the damages to the bathroom to keep him from shifting again right then and there. His back brain equated *dragon* with *safe*. He told himself the phone wouldn't eat him, as he stretched his hand to the phone on the wall and picked it up.

The caller ID window read "Trall, Rafiel" which made him draw a sigh of relief. For all his faults—and there were many—and despite the fact that he still carried a torch for Kyrie, Rafiel was the closest thing Tom had to a friend. He was, with Kyrie, almost the only other shifter Tom was friends with. Almost because an addled alligator shifter who went by "Old Joe" didn't exactly qualify as a *friend*. Not so long as friendship involved more than Tom covering up for Old Joe's shifts and giving him bowls of clam chowder on the side. Kyrie, Rafiel, Old Joe, an orangutan shifter, two now-dead beetle shifters and the dragon triad were the only adult shifters Tom had ever met, period. He guessed there weren't many of his kind in the world. The few, the proud, the totally messed up.

"Yeah?" he said, into the phone.

"Uh," Rafiel's voice said from the other end, as though the phone's being answered were the last thing he could possibly expect. Then, "I'd like to . . . I need to talk to you and Kyrie, when you have a minute."

There was that tone in Rafiel's voice—tight and short—that meant he was on the job. Tom wondered if Rafiel was alone or if he was picking his words carefully to avoid scaring a subordinate. Aloud he said only, "'Ssup?"

"Murder. There's . . . been . . . well, almost for sure murder. Human bones and stuff at the bottom of the shark tank at the aquarium."

"And?" After all, solving murders was Rafiel's job and he usually managed it without a little help from his friends.

"And I smell shifter," Rafiel said. "All over it."

"Oh," Tom said. "We'll be at The George." And suddenly he felt exactly like a man in the path of an oncoming train.

His dreams had been full of a nightmare about some ancient menace; the Great Sky Dragon had spoken in his mind; and now there was murder, with shifter involvement.

Was the shifter a murderer or the victim? Either way, it could make Tom's life more of a mess than it already was.

"Don't shift! Don't shift! Don't shift!" Kyrie told herself. But she wasn't at all sure she was listening, and she kept looking anxiously at her hands, clenched tight on the wheel. Her violet nail polish was cracked and peeled from her run-in with the bathroom door, so it was hard to tell whether the nails were lengthening into claws or not. Part of the reason she kept her nails varnished was to make sure that she saw the first signs of her nails lengthening into claws. Today that wouldn't work.

Outside the window, in the palm of visibility beyond the windshield, white snowflakes swirled. Past that, the flakes became a wall of white, seemingly streaming sideways, shimmering. Somewhere out there, in the nebulous distance, there were twin glimmers of dazzling whiteness, which were the only indications Kyrie had that the headlights of her tiny car were on.

"Maybe we should have walked," Tom said. He shuffled in his seat and leaned close to the snow-covered windshield, as though he could lend her extra vision.

Kyrie gritted her teeth. Maybe they should have, except that the three steps they'd taken on the driveway, their feet had gone out from under them, and they'd only remained upright by holding onto the car. From which point getting in the car had seemed a given. She slowed down—which mostly meant defaulting to the fractional amount of sliding the car seemed to do all on its own—and twisted up her windshield wipers' knob, not that it did much good.

"How can you see?" Tom asked.

"I can't," she said, just as a sudden gust of wind cleared the space ahead enough for her to see they were at the intersection of their street and the next perpendicular one. And that a massive, red SUV was headed for them at speed.

Don't shift, don't shift, don't shift, Kyrie thought, as a mantra, even as she felt her whole body clench and her muscles attempt to change shapes beneath her skin, to take the form of a panther. *Don't shift, don't shift, don't shift*, as she struggled to keep her breathing even, and bit into her lower lip with teeth that weren't getting any longer, not at all, not even a little bit. She maneuvered quickly with a tire up on the sidewalk, tilting crazily around the corner, even as the SUV went by them and buried them in a shower of slush. Bits of ice rattled against roof and windows.

A moan from Tom reminded her she wasn't the only one worried about panic setting off a shape-shift reaction. "Perhaps," he said, in the voice of a man working very hard to control himself. "I should get out and . . . fly?"

"What? Shift twice without eating? First thing in the morning? And the second time after getting hurt?" she said, and on that, as he moaned again, she realized she'd said the wrong thing. Shifting shapes demanded a lot of energy and, for some reason, it set off a desperate craving for protein. So did the lightning-fast healing of shifters. All Tom had eaten since shifting was half a dozen cookies. And there was no protein at all around. Except, of course, her. She wasn't about to volunteer. And she knew Tom would rather die than eat a person, much less her.

She pushed the gas, taking advantage of a momentary break in the storm that allowed her to see major crossroads ahead. Too late, she saw the light was red, but she was sliding through the intersection on the power of her momentum and slamming on the brakes only caused her to fishtail wildly and finally pivot halfway through to the left. Fortunately this turned the car right onto Fairfax where she was supposed to be. Sliding, she pressed the gas cautiously. Their shifting position caused the snow to seem to shift directions, so that she could now see—more or less—out her front window, but nothing on the side.

I'll never find The George, she thought to herself, and glared at her nails telling them they weren't

becoming claws, no they weren't, *not even a little bit*.

~~A sudden dazzling purple light to the left made her breathe in relief and confusion. The George's sign was still lit. Thank heavens. Anthony mustn't have closed yet, which meant, of course, that light and heat would still be on, and less trouble than turning them on again. It also made the diner easier to find.~~

She brought the car to a minimally-sliding, almost-complete stop and took a deep breath. Normally, turning left into the parking lot of The George from Fairfax involved taking your life in your own hands. Fairfax was a four-lane road, the main east-west artery of Goldport, and it was heavily traveled all the time. In addition, mistimed traffic lights ensured there was no break in the two lanes of traffic across which you must cut to make it into the parking lot.

Today, it involved another kind of risk. She couldn't see at all through the storm, to find out if any traffic was oncoming. Just white blankness. True, there were very few vehicles out, but she'd managed to almost run into two of those few on the way here. Kyrie took a deep breath. There was nothing for it but to turn. And she wasn't going to shift. *Not at all*.

She turned the wheel, fully expecting to go into a spin, but the tires grabbed onto some bit of yet unfrozen pavement and propelled them in a queasy slide-lurch across the other lanes of the road and up a gentle ramp into the parking lot.

The snow didn't allow her to see any other cars in the parking lot, and Kyrie didn't care. Bordered by the blind, windowless wall of a bed-and-breakfast and a warehouse, the parking lot gave on to the back door of The George and, through two outlets, to Pride and Fairfax Streets both. Right now, she waited until the car stopped sliding, then put it in park and pulled the parking brake, and leaned over the wheel, breathing deeply. *You're safe, you're safe. Don't shift*. There was no point even trying to find parking spots in this mess.

When her racing heart had calmed down, she lifted her head and saw the parking lot—as much as *could* be seen. Drifting snow spider-webbed by the light of two street lamps and the purple glare from the diner's back sign obscured everything save for the two large supply vans parked in the middle of the lot. She looked to the passenger side of the car, where Tom was blinking and, she suspected, had just opened his eyes after calming himself.

"We should really—" Kyrie started and stopped. Through the snow she'd glimpsed something, half seen. She thought it was . . . but it couldn't be. Surely . . .

"Was that," Tom said, his voice small, "a dragon's wing?"

"Go inside," Tom said, as he glimpsed the wing again, through the multiplying flakes. "It's a red wing. It's . . ." He didn't say it. He couldn't quite assemble words.

His brain, still fogged from his quick shift into dragon and back, still laboring under the guilt of what he'd done to the bathroom—let alone the terror of the precipitous drive here, which had felt less like driving than tumbling down a chute—could not manage to describe the wing. But he was sure, from his two brief glimpses, that it was a Chinese dragon. An Asian dragon like the Great Sky Dragon and his cohorts.

Feeling for the door handle with half-frozen, still aching fingers, Tom managed to grasp it and throw the door open against resistance of what he hoped was stiff wind, and not a dragon tail or claw, as he yelled over the howling storm at Kyrie. "Go inside. I'll deal with it."

He plunged out of the car, his hair and his unzipped black leather jacket whipping about in the howling storm, just in time for his feet to go out from under him, and to reach, blindly, for the car door for support, and bring himself upright, and stare into . . .

He was big and red. No. As he blinked to keep his eyes from freezing, he thought he wasn't that big. Smaller than Tom himself in dragon form. But he was also horribly familiar—more familiar as Tom focused on the details and noted that the dragon's front left paw was much smaller than the other. He was . . . Red Dragon. Not only was he was one of the Great Sky Dragon's cohorts, but when Tom had last seen him there had been a big battle, and Red Dragon had ended with his arm ripped out at the roots. Or rather, Tom had ripped Red Dragon's arm off, then used it to beat Red Dragon with.

Tom knew—from experience—that his kind was hard to kill. But this was a particular foe he'd never thought to see again; one he was sure had more reasons for vendetta against him than anyone else alive.

He felt his throat close and the panic he'd—barely—managed to control in the car surged through his body like electric current, seeking grounding. Not finding it, it twisted in a sparkle through his flesh. He felt his bruised, battered limbs wrench, and his body bend, and a hollow cough echoed through his throat mingled with a scream of pain that he could no longer keep back. His mouth opened, and he swallowed an aspiration of snow, cold and suffocating. He knew, absolutely knew, that if he shifted he would attack Red Dragon and probably try to eat him. He was *that* protein-starved. A protein-starved Tom ate uncooked meat and whatever else he could get his hands on. A protein-starved dragon would hunt live prey.

"Run," he told Kyrie with what was left of his human mind and his human voice, already sounding slurpy and hissy as his teeth shifted position. "Run inside, Kyrie."

He could just tell in the periphery of his beclouded vision that she was not obeying. Not even considering it, and he wondered if his voice had already changed too much. If perhaps she couldn't understand him. His body twisted again, the pain of shifting unbearable on his bruised flesh and cake bones, and he kept his eyes on the other dragon, in case he should have any ideas of flaming or striking. Dragons were hard to kill but not impossible. This Tom knew. If you severed the head from the rest of the body, if you divided the body in two. If you incinerated the body. Possibly if you destroyed the brain. Those deaths even a dragon could not overcome.

Tom had to think of how to inflict them on his foe, and he had to protect himself from them. He felt his fingers lengthen into claws and—

"No," it was Kyrie's voice, decisive sounding. And Kyrie—slim, unshifted, very human Kyrie—stood between the two dragons, her dark blue ski jacket making her just slightly bulkier than normal

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