

Chapter 3

Traveling the twilight ribbons of existences, Richard arrived at a juncture of reality and stopped. Although one variation of the reality he sought, something defied expectations of what should be.

There had been raids here to acquire people to increase another world's population and build it up. He'd known about those. They weren't significant. That's how some lesser powers worked. Richard's current plans were to investigate them on his sister's behalf. She worked for the Crown Prince, or so *she said*. Richard was dubious although he had little basis for believing his sister lied. Knowing so little, though, no urgency was attached to his investigation. Raids across realities by lesser powers were frequent. This one was closer to their home reality and could be related to another of the Powers' activities, thus their cause for concern.

Weighing plans against needs, Richard decided he wanted to know why this reality seemed off before going on. It was an odd moment in his being. He had no body outside of his perception of himself but it was that perception of himself having a body that allowed him travel between realities along the ribbons that defined that. Looking up, he pivoted on the ribbon he followed and waited for twilight to end and reality to firm.

He acquired his usual solid appearance, pleasing him. It was the one he thought of as 'himself'. Armor formed on him but not quite its typical pieces and colors. His sword was shorter and fatter. Such tangibles outside of his person were often influenced by others and little worried him. Preferring the comfort of his familiar steel, he finessed it into its usual length and shape.

Being in his recurring physical aspects showed whatever was happening here wasn't strong enough to affect him greatly. Thinking that perhaps he'd over-reacted, he prepared to resume his travel. As the ground around him developed, a sloped field took shape. Grasses and small bushes grew up around him. Still with wary tension, a brown doe with two yearlings showed up on the field's far side about fifty yards away. Blue sky appeared with a yellow sun, late in the day from its angle. True suns always traveled in the same direction. Time and location did affect the sun's angles and rate of travel. Richard

had been traveling through time but not through space. That relied on the major assumption that he knew the ribbon sufficiently well to understand when he moved through one or the other. Richard didn't take matters like that for granted.

Trees formed. More grasses grew. The world provided information. This was part of the world called Ouragon in some existences. Most of those existences had it as part a country, territory or empire. Local natives controlled it in some places but invasions were underway. Some existences held the territory was ruled by English, Germans and Russians, along with Cossacks and Mongolians. The same territory was known by many other names in other realities, depending upon who settled and ruled it.

He spied five dark skinned people exiting the thick woods on the field's northern edge. Takelma Indians, the world informed him, human and armed for battle. They were a local controlling force, native to this area for several thousand years. They paid him little attention.

That wasn't so for the next person Richard saw. An armor clad knight mounted on a aquamarine and gold dragon horse raised a sword on the field's other end. Battle blows and heavy use scarred his armor. Three silver lilies presented on azure and scarlet quarters were painted on his targe.

The knight was called Teygr, Richard learned from the world. He was Richard's vague acquaintance and sometime foe in the old New World. Now he was out in this part of the old New World, a bit odd but not extraordinary.

Teygr regarded Richard for almost half a minute but Richard stayed relaxed. The forming confrontation between knight and Takelma didn't involve Richard. This was personal between Teygr, the group of rogue warriors he accompanied, and the Takelma. The Indian were resisting the European intrusion and fighting to keep control of their way of existence. Richard's role here, the world told him, was as a knight in paid service to protect another band of explorers and traders from yet another kingdom presenting a claim. In that regard, he was potentially a threat to both of the groups he saw. Richard wasn't planning to stay and be involved, though.

Spurring his mount, the knight charged the Indians. The dragon horse under him was one of the most serious things Richard saw wrong in this reality. Armor clad medieval knights fighting American

Indians weren't unusual. Those sort of convoluted histories often happened. He thought them inserted by someone, perhaps a being controlling a Parasam, if such people existed, as some Scholars hypothesized, and lesser powers sometimes could move people without changing who they were.

No, the problem was the beast the knight rode. Shaped like a horse one and a half times the size of a Clysdale, dull aquamarine scales imposed with vertical golden stripes covered its body where it wasn't armored. That was a *huge* oddity, and that it was known here in this reality as a *horse* was a further startling development of a very skewed knowledge.

Having experienced horses and dragons in several realities, Richard knew the differences between them. Common truths across all the realities was that dragons were called dragons or some variation of its root words, depending on the cultures, but they were never called horses, and never used as mounts under knights. He wasn't a Scholar but this seemed like bleed over between realities. Others would discount his observation, he acknowledged with biting humor, because he could not be sure if what he saw was always what was real.

That wasn't his concern. As they liked to remind him, he wasn't a Scholar. Satisfied that he'd verified his worry that he had not traveled in space while vetting that the reality he traversed was misaligned in some way, Richard turned his back on the battle as the Indians braced for the knight's arrival, and resumed his travel.

He was unsure how the differences between realities and Parasams appeared to others. For him, there were ribbons. The reality he was visiting presented hundreds of ribbons arrayed as a half circle with him as their center, where they came together. Most ribbons could be discerned from one another by differences in color, texture, or how their surface moved. Others differentiated themselves by how they reflected light. Within them were more complexities, presented as threads. This was why Richard didn't believe that reality, time periods and Parasams weren't all references to the same matter. He knew that some Parasams created multiple realities happening at once, in the same location.

The number of ribbons present surprised Richard. A large number of ribbons usually indicated fluctuating existences, and changes in history, substances and time. They could also be why there was

bleed over, creating a dragon thought of as a horse. That was unusual. People knew what a horse was and understood what a dragon was, and convincing them of otherwise would be difficult. They seemed like cemented, consistent facts. Ah, he decided, maybe that was the point of the forces behind the changing realities. That, though, would mean there was an intelligence behind them, either native to the reality or....

Richard didn't want to think about it more. That's why he wasn't a Scholar. Contemplating his desired ribbon, he pursed his lips and mused. Most would call him a beautiful man, a fact he knew and used but dismissed it as otherwise useless. More important was his height, weight and strength, but his greatest attribute was his ability to see and remember the differences in the other worlds and places without himself being much affected. Six foot five and two hundred and fifty of consistently exercised muscles, he was always white, pale or Caucasian, almost always with dirty blond hair – of varying lengths and differing in styles – and ashy grey irises. His eyes frequently reflected other colors present and were sometimes blue grey, charcoal gray or striated with amber or green in the grey, though not both.

Although a thousand ribbons flickered and danced in his regard, he knew which to choose from experience. His process was a matter of finding the right place. Somewhere down one of these ribbons was the focus he sought. As he studied it, he perceived a thread that belonged to Marius.

So Marius had been here. Richard wondered why that had been. Although the ribbon seemed dulled from lost energy, meaning time had passed, that Marius traveled the same ribbon that he sought intrigued Richard. The chosen ribbon would deliver Richard to a reality of an American Ashland, in Oregon. That's where the raids had been taking place. Richard asked himself if it was conceivable that Marius was behind the raids. While conceivable, it was not like Marius' methods. He was more of a destroyer, not a raider. Strategies could change, though.

Resuming his walk, Richard followed the thread. More information crept into him. He lost his armor and became an insubstantial again. That would be temporary. As he focused on the ribbon and walked into it, its reality embraced him. His clothing changed but his body did not. For this venture, he finessed that his sword remain in its scabbard at his side but not be visible to others. Its surface quit

reflecting light as the finesse grew. In moments, he could see it by knowing it was there but others would not know. That was suitable for this reality. There are customs to be observed and one was that people didn't carry swords.

As he expected, threads indicated others like Marius, somewhat like himself, had travelled to the same location. That was why he was here. Reports of raids had filtered through to his sister. He was there to track them and sort the matter. It would be difficult to sort with Marius involved.

Marius had once bested him. Only luck's interference had allowed Richard's escape. Marius had demonstrated deceptive strength, quickness and intelligence. Remembering that incident, he wondered if this was a trap. Marius had vowed to find and kill him. Marius was clever enough to manipulate matters and lure Richard into a trap.

Richard thought that amusing if it was Marius' belief. He thought he alone was one able to read the ribbons and the threads. His sister could read the ribbons and was more adapt at finding them and stirring the shift but Richard didn't believe she could follow the threads that individuals and events left. Nor did he tell her that he could. Once he realized he could and that she didn't seem to have his skill, some instinct of self-preservation kept him from telling her.

He returned his thinking to Marius and Ashland. That was a strange location for a trap. Like him, Marius was also originally of a knight realm, born into a time and space where knights ruled. Both had become knights and later came to know and travel the Parasams and realities in service to others.

But existences had some rules. This Ashland was more technologically oriented although not greatly advanced. Sword fight in Ashland of that reality and Parasam would cause broader issues. All of the Powers tacitly agreed that stability in realities worked to everyone's advantage. Richard did not think Marius would risk violating the existence. Such violations damaged the seals between existences and had consequences. Only fools and the ignorant were likely to break the seals. Richard thought Marius a coward with low morals and violence prone but he did not think him a fool. Surely even he understood the wide potential consequences. He thought he knew Marius enough to move forward with that as a fact.

This would not be a trap Marius set for Richard, then. Marius was there for another reason.

Richard thought of Ashland. Although he'd visited it before, he knew it mostly from the Scholars and Historians. It was a very stable region and platform for several realities. Blue skies dominated most. No one seemed to rule it. There were rumors about why. Richard himself could see it had once been a battleground. That was apparent from the layers of people and existences visible to him and the multiple realities based in the region. Powerful events had happened there for whatever reasons. The beings behind those events seemed to have moved on.

He recalled previous visits. Non-descript residents resided among the people. The Scholars estimated the last Parasam shift took place several thousand years before in their time period. It was hard to say these things with certainty. Time differed between realities, Parasams, and even people. For Richard, it was a lethargic river.

Finishing these thoughts, Richard decided he would travel to Ashland and find Marius. He would need to be careful. The thread Marius left showed he traveled with a significant number of people, perhaps a contingent of as many one hundred if Richard was correct about the thread's composition. Richard was sure he was certain but that conclusion drew more questions and problems. That sort of group traveling together would draw attention. Richard pondered how he would travel with such a group in Ashland. Ashland of that reality was home to a university. They could be there as students.

That made some sense. One thing about that Parasam and reality was that it dictated a common sense of understanding about history and science. Newcomers were absorbed as one of its own. Even people like himself and Marius would be given an identity and history that helped others fit him into their existence. The difference was that he and Marius remembered the truth. He wasn't so sure about a hundred people traveling with Marius, doubting it possible to travel with such a large number that could remember the truth. There was a mass effect to having so many who knew the truth. They fractured such realities' consistencies.

Richard could not turn his back on the thread. He needed to see what was going on in that realm. So deciding, he followed the thread onto the ribbon that became Ashland, Oregon, in America in 2012.

Chapter 4

“A two headed dragon,” people said around Marius. Disbelief and skepticism chimed in their voices.

Their reaction dismayed him. They babbled with questions and speculation, further annoying Marius. “Quiet,” he said. They’d faced dragons before so they should be aware of what to expect and how to fight them – for what it was worth, with a large dragon – but that’s not who they currently were....

“Pull yourselves together,” he said, mustering a command precision. “You’ve faced dragons before.” Their returned stares said they didn’t believe him. Marius did not believe Lord Stiltman would let them forget about something like dragons. He couldn’t let himself think about that now. Freshly irked with Stiltman, Marius reached for a weapon while formulating an action plan.

His hand found air where his sword handle should be before recollecting that they’d arrived without weapons. No weapons meant no choice but to evade the dragon unless Stiltman armed them. How that would go depended upon the type of dragon faced.

Qarin was still talking fast and low and sniggering. Marius didn’t understand him but shot him a hard look. “Shut up, Qarin.”

He glanced back up toward the dragon. It seemed like it was still far off and barely moving, calling scenes of huge landing cargo jets. This thing seemed so slow and far, it must be huge. “Take cover under the trees,” he said. “Try to hide and stay still and quiet.” Stillness and quiet would both be needed until they knew more about this dragon. He hoped it was a dragon that depended on smell or other means to find its prey and was not far seeing. That was doubtful as it was a flying dragon.

The dogs’ howling grated Marius’ patience. Now realizing how much fear and panic he heard in the dogs’ noise, he considered it likely their barking and howling was related to the dragon’s approach. Hearing and seeing none of his people moving, Marius regarded them with increasing irritation. “Are you deaf? Flying dragons usually have excellent vision. *Hide. Now.*” As his men finally turned left and right, seeking cover with Qarin muttering, “I can’t believe it, I’m hiding from a dragon,” Marius took Albert by the arm and put out a hand. “Your binoculars.”

Saying, "I thought you would want them," Albert was already slipping them from his neck. "I have a camera, too." He indicated a black bag hanging from his shoulder.

Marius used a second to ponder why Albert would have a camera and why he would mention it as though it was important or even useful, and if Albert had the camera before when Marius saw him. At least Albert didn't seem too nervous. He didn't seem like the fighter Marius knew, though. Tall, yellow haired and beefy with muscle and fat in a red tee shirt emblazoned with SOU in white letters, Albert at least looked like he could fight.

"Good. Keep hold of that," Marius said. He didn't believe taking photos would be useful. Accepting the binoculars as he stepped back toward leafy cover, Marius lifted the glasses to his eyes, adjusted them and tried remembering what he knew about dragons, specifically flying dragons.

They were usually endowed with great vision. This one was red as a spill of dark wine on the blue sky, and two-headed, as Albert had observed. Its descent clarified the creature's size. Marius had fought dragons before but never one with two heads. The heads seemed symmetrical, as did its body. Of course, he'd never fought a dragon without a weapon before. Lucky him, it was becoming a day of personal firsts.

The world wasn't telling Marius anything about the dragon, which was interesting and disturbing. It seemed actually that the world was rejecting the chance that the dragon could be real. Knowledge emerging from his knowledge of this world and its cultures was that dragons were thought of as mythological creatures, part of legends of a fantasy past, and not real. He wondered if this could be a virtual reality or mass hallucination or illusion. The world seemed to believe those possibilities were more real than an actual dragon.

He needed outside verification. Casting a glance around to ensure his people weren't close, he whispered, "Lord Stiltman, a dragon is approaching. Do you have counsel? Can you arm us?"

He expected a swift brusque reply but Stiltman didn't respond, startling Marius. It didn't quite feel like Stiltman was there but nor did Marius definitively think Stiltman wasn't present. It was a strange conundrum, drawing Marius into quick speculation that the dragon's appearance was Stiltman's test before he addressed the immediate need of what to do.

Fighting the dragon without weapons was not an option. Killing a one headed dragon was difficult. Two heads could only add complications.

Making decisions, he moved back beside Albert. "Listen, Albert." Hanging back, Qarin and Victor leaned toward them to hear. Marius waved them in as he spoke. "Quit hovering and come here. Listen. Pay attention. We don't have weapons. We can't fight this dragon. We need to -- "

Qarin surprised him by guffawing and muttering, "No kidding."

Blinking back surprise and distraction, Marius went on more slowly, "We need to evade the dragon. Perhaps it hasn't seen us." He could not imagine why the dragon was here, coming toward them, if the dragon didn't know they were here. The valley below would be full of other opportunities. "Spread out, stay in twos and threes, no more than that. Take cover." Watching the dragon coming, noting it seemed to be coming directly for them, Marius realized none of his group could safely cross the street without the dragon seeing them.

Houses surrounded them. Their eaves and walls could provide some hiding places. If needed, they would break into the houses. The people here wouldn't like others entering their house and call the police. That could still work out because some of the local police were aligned with Stiltman.

Deciding he wanted to limit local involvement as much as he could, Marius terminated that line of thinking. "Understand?" He swept the three with his eyes. Qarin and Walter seemed confused but Victor grasped it. "Spread the word," Marius said. "Do it *now*."

They moved off hissing his instructions toward the others. Now that he'd had greater time to comprehend the situation, Marius was certain this was Stiltman's test. That provided an explanation for why Stiltman wasn't answering and why the dragon was coming *for them only*. The town had been busy with activity when he first saw it, so the dragon would have a number of targets more quickly and easily reached than him and his group. So no doubt it was coming for them, probably as Stiltman's test. Thinking, this gave reason for why Stiltman had brought him to Ashland, Marius hid a secret smile and considered how he was going to handle this test.

He trained Albert's binoculars on the dragon anew. More details were apparent. Besides two large, horned heads on long necks, the dragon featured two pairs of short, forward slender arms. He couldn't see its tail but its wings, held out like an aircraft's fixed wings, seemed extremely wide. There was no doubt the dragon's destination was them.

Making a decision about how to handle this, Marius said to his men, "Stay hidden. I'm going to distract the dragon." He couldn't kill the dragon and it was undoubtedly stronger and faster, but he knew he was likely faster and smarter than it expected of its prey. He couldn't say the same about his people, not in this reality.

As he stepped into the middle of the street, a silver Mercedes SUV rounded the corner. Coming up the hill, it slowed. Marius moved out of the way. The driver seemed oblivious to the descending dragon, something that struck Marius as unusual. As the Mercedes passed, a maroon Volvo went down the opposite way. Its driver glanced at Marius but didn't look up toward the dragon.

It was possible they were simply oblivious people but Marius was suspicious. Coming fast, the dragon grew larger by the second. Marius made out its eyes. Both pairs were fixed on him.

His timing would be a fine thing. Beginning a back pedal, he started down the hill, deciding that he would lead the dragon down away from his people.

The dogs' noises were almost screams. The dragon beat its wings. Glancing at street signs and house numbers so he would know where to return, Marius shouted, "Stay hidden, I'll be back," and broke into a trot.

He'd misjudged, he realized. The dragon was bigger than it had seemed. That size was deceptive. It might be the largest dragon he'd ever known, rivaling those in the ancient murals.

It was coming faster than he planned, too.

With that, it was almost on him. Accelerating into a flat-out sprint, he pounded down the tarred roads as another car drove up toward him. Veering out of its way, he noted *that driver* didn't look at the dragon and then glanced over his shoulder up toward the big creature.

The dragon wasn't following him.

Sliding to a stop on the gritty road, Marius lurched into a turn. With shock, he saw it was heading for his people's hidden positions. Shouting, "Hey, hey," he jumped up and down and waved his arms, trying for the dragon's attention as it flew over the car going up the hill.

Marius knew his waving was useless and was already considering other approaches. "Lord Stiltman," he called. Unsure what his next words would be, he didn't continue. He would not ask Stiltman to end this if it was a test. Should this not be a test –

That would be another question for the aftermath. Ignoring the car and Marius, the dragon descended on the stretch of trees lining the roads and yards. Running back up the street, Marius saw men working on a lawn, hoes, shovels and rakes around them. Without slowing, he veered toward them, shouting, "I'm borrowing this." Grabbing a long handled spade, he charged up the hill as the workers yelled, "Hey," sprayed some swearing, and came after him. Their co-worker, farther up the street, moved to intercept Marius.

He was sure they did not see the dragon. Reaching him, the closest man put out a hand. Not wanting a confrontation with them, Marius dodged it and said, "I just need it for a few minutes. I swear I'll bring it right back." The man was larger than him, mostly with belly weight. Marius was certain he would be able to take him.

Shouts drew his look back up the road. Its heads dipping, the dragon crashed into the trees up the hill, toppling a large oak. Marius' men screamed and broke out of their cover, running in different directions.

"What the hell's going on?" one of the yard workers asked with an accent that Marius placed as Texan as the other exclaimed, "Jesus Christ, did you see that? That tree just fell over."

"There are people up there," another called out as someone else said, "It was the wind, like a cyclone."

The falling tree snapped telephone wires before taking down a utility pole and crashing over a house and parked car. Babbling about the falling tree, the lawn workers began running up the hill behind Marius.

Marius outdistanced them within yards. They seemed ignorant of the dragon but clearly saw its results. As the fallen tree's leaves shimmied, one dragon head rose, a man clutched in its mouth, shaking the man like a large dog with a toy. Swinging its tail, the dragon knocked down a fir tree and a second telephone pole and launched a parked Chevrolet Yukon twenty feet into the air. It flew over Marius as he dodged a flying branch, sending the men behind him scattering for cover as the vehicle hit the road and tumbled along in a spray of glass.

The dragon's other head rose above the trees with a struggling, writhing man in his jaws. Marius ran faster but debris hampered him. Waving the shovel, he shouted at the dragon. A bloody man in each mouth, it beat its wings against the air, slamming Marius and the other men back onto the ground. Scrambling back up, Marius seized his spade like a spear and arched it toward the nearest dragon eye. Faster than Marius thought possible, the dragon swung around and climbed into the air back along the path that it had come as he scrambled to his feet and swore at its retreat.

Bleeding and crying men were buried in wreckage all around the street. Police cars with flashing lights and whooping sirens arrived. People stumbled out of neighboring houses. A baby was wailing.

Marius felt dazed by events. He'd lost two men. More were injured and bleeding. Several had torturously broken arms and legs.

The dogs fell silent as the dragon's shape became smaller. Nobody looked toward it except him, Marius saw. Nobody else recognized a dragon attack had taken place. Even his own people seemed confused by events, talking about a whirlwind, like a small tornado, doing the damage.

"What are you doing?" Stiltman asked him. "Why are you delaying? Richard is arriving. Others might be here soon. You need to get your men to their locations or we'll lose our advantage. Changes are already afoot. Hurry, Marius, *hurry.*"

Chapter 5

Richard emerged walking south on Main Street in the downtown area by the movie theater, not far from the tall and yellow Ashland Springs Hotel. Opened in 1925 as the Lithia Springs Hotel, he knew with a glance, nine stories, the tallest building in town. It had been the Mark Antony.

There was a time differential from Richard's last visit here. The world was more 'modern' in that their technology, mostly outgrowth of the same ideas surrounding the material's properties and energy, was used with more frequency, but Richard had little trouble coping. This reality thought he lived in the area and had been present the entire time.

His clothes changed. Although he wore black denim, it was well made and fit him perfectly. Handmade black leather boots enclosed his feet. These were things he did without much deliberate thought.

The general street layouts and weather were all as he remembered. The world told him he'd been an Ashland resident for twelve years and his home was a large house on Grisham Street above downtown. He was twice divorced with two grown children from each marriage. No offspring or exes lived in this area. One previous ex-wife was German and lived in Germany. Her home, with a new husband, was in Heidelberg, where she was a professor with the university. The children lived in Bonn and Berlin. Both were females. The one residing in Berlin was a lesbian and an artist while the one residing in Bonn was married with two children and worked for the US government.

The other wife resided in Atlanta, Georgia, in the United States. She and Richard had a son and daughter. The son was a US Marine Captain on duty in Afghanistan. His sister, who was younger, lived with her husband in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They also had children.

Richard had finessed some of those details. By thinking and believing them, the reality had extended it as fact. He finessed these pieces because he preferred that he not have a personal life complicated by interactions with others. He'd also finessed a background that made him wealthy, partly from a successful dot com enterprise but also some inherited properties. He drove a black Porsche Panamera but not being a fan of cars, he preferred walking. There was something about being in a motor

vehicle that challenged his skills in keeping reality separated. He managed to also finesse that he did not have a steady girlfriend. Relationships were always problematic.

With the reality formed around him, solid and in motion, he sought the telltales of the thread that would lead him to Marius. The threads were there with their own message, but difficult to grasp, forcing Richard into deeper concentration.

The threads sharpened. The nearest threads were mostly byproducts of the reality forming. Moving past them, he found a concentration of threads and determined they belonged to Marius. Marius was here but not too close, apparently arriving on a street above the downtown and then traveling along the streets via foot. Such threads were harder to discern while keeping contact with reality.

He hoped this would be easier. Nothing told him who'd been here on raids but then realities tended to diminish threads unless it was a half world or twilight existence. Head bent, Richard walked slowly down the sidewalk, searching for more traces of Marius' thread.

He felt the air cool. Different odors drifted around him. The light flickered, changing. As he glanced up, he saw a dark red sky took over the blue. With surprise, he realized the Parasam had changed.

Richard moved his hand to his sword. It remained invisible. His clothing and shoes didn't change. The weather was cooler but less humid. Increasing his wariness, he moved his gaze among the passing people and buildings, watching for threats. Half worlds such as these were often victimized by people's fear. Thinking their fears to be true, people added odd dangers to the realities.

The Parasam shift was a slow moving change. Some people were losing human shapes. This growing new reality knew of his Crown Prince. Perhaps it had leached the knowledge from Richard's existence. While unusual, it had happened before. Richard could finesse that essence of reality to his advantage.

As it was a half world, realities' ribbons and the supporting threads became more visible to him. That pleased him because it made following Marius easier. His ribbon grew brighter. Marius was in the area and seemed to be in this time period and didn't seem far away.

Thinking this could again be a trap, Richard turned into a small coffee shop to sit and watch events. The shop was crowded but Richard didn't mind crowds. He liked coffee shops. People expected you to loiter without buying or doing much. Sitting and staring, apparently deep in thought, was acceptable to the owners, employees and other customers. Worse in this coffee shop was the place's volume. Loud commercial rock music blared over speakers, forcing people to shout and laugh over it.

Nothing untoward emerged under his gaze. Finishing his espresso, he found Marius' thread out on the sidewalk and resumed tracking the other. Traffic was moderate, dominated by motor vehicles using electricity or petroleum fuels. Turning south, he left Main Street and followed Siskiyou Boulevard. Some of the threads within Marius' threads broke off toward the college campus.

Richard had expected that. Richard understood from the reality that Marius had not deployed them all as students. Smaller groups had split off. Richard figured they could be existing here as homeless groups. People mostly avoided contact of any sort with the homeless in this reality. That made it easy for the homeless to set up their own camps.

Clever of Marius, he thought with a silent chuckle, passing the university campus (which he knew was once a hospital) and several small sandwich shops. Using homeless camps would allow Marius to disperse his people and yet be readily available and able to maintain awareness of their reality without causing reality conflicts. It was a very good strategy, Richard saw, thinking that he would remember it to utilize in the future.

A changing Parasam would fit right into the way Marius behaved and his set up. Marius, though, was not a person who could change a Parasam any more than Richard could change it. Richard didn't think that Marius was here to change the Parasam but was here because he had expected the Parasam to change. That, itself, was interesting. Richard wondered if it had to do with the raids.

Following Marius' thread, Richard quickened his pace, crossed the street and turned down Ashland Street. Relaxing his grip on reality enabled faster progress. One step let him slide ten feet forward. No one except Marius and their sort would notice this. More threads broke off toward the university's newest dorms but the bulk of the threads were further ahead somewhere. Not quit correlating

to his understanding of the homeless camp locations, Richard didn't understand where Marius' people were or what they could be doing.

More town knowledge crept in. Richard understood that Marius and his companions could be living in hotels and apartments further ahead, in addition to those camping as homeless and passing as students. Some were up on Siskiyou at the Ashlander.

The Parasam shift continued. Watching ahead, Richard slowed, blinking as he took in a deviation from his expectations. A man ahead did not seem to be changing with the Parasam. Looking at him, Marius couldn't see any differences in the man. No threads betrayed his arrival or activity. He seemed to have just one nature.

That perturbed Richard. While still young and learning about the Parasams and realities, he had met the one Parasam Scholar that he liked, Sophitries. "The realities like to tie the ends together into finished tapestries," Sophitries had told Richard over and over again. "Always be aware of the thread that does not fit the rest."

Marius more or less fit the rest. There were mysteries about how he traveled between realities and finessed them but he was predictable despite his methodology.

This man, however...this man was a thread that did not fit in the panoply of Richard's expectations.

This was a person he would need to follow.

Chapter 6

I loved DC's Superman comic books when I was growing up. I didn't have much use for the Superman movies. They didn't match my take on the comic books, especially the more modern Superman movies.

I wasn't really a collector but I had all of them that I could find and buy. I just kept them in boxes or piles in my closet and on my little oak desk. My adopted little brother burned them the year after I went to college. Took them all, put them into a pile behind the garage and added charcoal briquette starter fluid and a match. Absolutely refused to tell anyone in the family why he did it.

Doing something like that to your brother's possessions forces a change in the relationship. It was his first statement that he wasn't happy. I had a few beers with his friends at his funeral ten years ago and found out it was part of larger issues he was exploring about not belonging. I was disappointed as hell to hear about it, having never had a clue before the comic book cook out that he was upset with life. He always seemed a mellow kid.

Far as I know, my adopted brother didn't have anything to do with the sky on Earth changing to red. But seeing it, I thought of Superman and my comic books and then thought of little 'bro.

On the day the sky changed, July was maintaining its reputation as a hot month but my life was losing its comfortable luster. Katie Lin had reacquainted herself with me via a golf club to my head, reminding me of the one year anniversary of our drunken humping. The boys were grown and out of the house. My wife had decided to leave me. It was our third effort to separate, so we had that charm going for us. Although I despise change, I was just about ready to accept it. I like comfortable and predictable ruts but our arguments and behavior were undermining my rut's comfort. Once I dreamed of being more than a rut dweller but then I met the world. Teachers quickly determined I wasn't a world changer. I went along with the diagnosis, figuring it was easier than fighting them and proving them wrong. That began my life in a rut.

Don't demean accepting life in a rut. You can do a lot there, like have a marriage, family and a pretty comfortable life. I'd managed it. Even with the pending divorce, I probably would have been okay

if the sky hadn't gone red on me. Hand to God, one minute the sky was blue and the next it was red, changing just before I reached my coffee haunt during my daily walk.

I didn't witness the sky's change. Humming Eric Clapton's acoustic version of "Layla" and thinking of Katie Lin, I walked Walker Street's sidewalk under a July blue sky, heading for The Beanery. I admit that I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention. Katie Lin had attacked me that morning and I still dwelled in the throes of the surprise and violence, worried she was going to do it again but suffering from my habits. I wanted my coffee and needed a walk to escape work, so I figured I would risk another Katie Lin attack.

The Beanery is a stick and wood house turned into a coffee shop by the Allan Brothers back in the early seventies, a place wedged onto a street corner between asphalt roads and parking lots. Dirty white cement sidewalks surround it like a moat. One person, Alan, had founded the business. He'd invented the brothers part because he thought it sounded better. He'd had pretensions to poetry and a bad stomach. His bad stomach started a quest to find better coffee back in the 1960s.

The Ashland Beanery was his first coffee shop. Now he had a little chain in western Oregon. Many dislike the Ashland Beanery, considering it a filthy place, a superficial judgment inspired by the dingy floor and peeling thick French blue paint. Most also didn't like the coffee, which Allan Brothers roasted themselves.

I had no problem with it. My taste buds had lost their appreciation of flavors and I liked The Beanery's sloppy unfettered ambiance. I visited just about every day, three hundred fifty of the year's typical three hundred and sixty-five. I'm away the other fifteen days. Most days I walk, even enduring cold and nasty weather, but I drive when time curtails my opportunity. My drink is up to \$4.35 a drink. I tip a dollar. One thousand eight hundred seventy two dollars and fifty cents a year on coffee. Back when I started, beers cost fifty cents more than coffee. Now beers were cheaper. My vices were becoming more expensive.

As I reached the coffee shop and prepared to make my turn up its short flight of concrete steps, my eyes started itching like mad. A sneezing fit seized me. I'm like Dad like that, blowing out big sneezes

that stagger me like a sailing yacht catching the wrong wind on a rough sea. Reaching the corner, I caught a flash of sound and noise ahead.

Drawing back and stopping, I looked down and sneezed again. Disgust swelled in me as bird droppings splattered the grayed and pitted cement sidewalk. I don't care that some people think bird crap on you will deliver good luck. I don't believe that. I figure it's just crap but figured I should have expected a bird would crap on me because my wife was leaving me and Katie had attacked me. It was that kind of day. I'd love it if I did have good luck and win a big lottery after she left me but a big mountain of skepticism kept me from any real hope of expectation that was going to happen. Looking up to find and curse the offending bird, I saw the apple red sky.

It was hard seeing. It had grown dark, like a storm cloud blocked the sun. I took off my sunglasses to better see the world. Sensations seized me, sensations like someone was hammering a railroad pike straight into my brain through my forehead, freezing me with pain. More than that, the world seemed frozen. Putting it together through my pain, I could see and think but it was all still and quiet.

Then everything snapped forward, including me. Confusion took hold of me for a few more seconds as I tried figuring out what was going on. Confirming the sky remained red, I tucked my sunglasses into my shirt pocket, gawked more at the dark red sky and finished the last steps, wobbling and weaving like I had a little beer buzz going. Staggering into the coffee shop with my hands out on either side to catch myself, I asked the people behind the counter, "God almighty, what's going on with the sky? You all see that?"

"What," someone said from somewhere else in the room.

I was having trouble seeing and couldn't tell you who spoke. My vision was hazy and my eyes hurt. "Are you kidding me? Haven't you seen? I'm talking about the sky, look at the sky. What's up with that?"

"With what?" Sam asked from behind the corner. "What about the sky?"

I repeated, "With what?"

His question stunned me. A quiet slender young guy, Sam is a joker so I squinted at him for signs he was kidding. Making out his face was hard. It seemed like it was vibrating. “What do you mean, ‘with what’? Are you blind? I’m talking about what’s up with the sky.” I pointed out the window to be helpful. “Open your eyes and look out the damn window – the sky is *red*. Don’t you guys see that?”

A raw, angry buzzing droned in my ears. As people stirred and looked out, I continued more loudly, “What’s going on? What is this? What’s causing the sky to turn red? Has there been some kind of chemical spill or a nuke?” Then, because the noise was getting louder, I looked around and snapped, “What the hell is that noise?”

It was dawning on me that it might just be me experiencing all this.

The coffee shop started moving. It wasn’t like it was being towed, but like the lines were losing their structure and firmness. When I say lines, I’m talking about the world’s shape, like the counter, shelves and window sills. Some lines became untethered, drifting away like kite tails.

Grabbing a swaying post, I looked outside. The street flowed like a river and the red sky darkened more. As I thought, what the hell, the counter stretched out and snapped back. My ears began feeling like something was trying to free itself from my head by kicking out my eardrums.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked the rest. They were shaking. So was the building. I’ve been in quakes, like in Mountain View, California, in 1989 when the Loma Prieta quake struck, among others. This didn’t feel like a quake.

“Don’t tell me you don’t feel that,” I said. They *had* to be feeling it. “You guys can’t tell me that you don’t feel that. It’s like we’re on one of those things at the amusement park, you know, like a haunted house, where you walk – no, the pirate ship, where you walk on part of it? And it vibrates? Are you guys feeling it?”

All were checking me out but no one was answering. Waving and snaking, the shop’s interior lines began emitting bubbles, like they were underwater. Some stuff, like the cash register, counter, coffee equipment and bags of coffee, grew bright and blurry. I felt drunk and off balance.

And I was still talking, unaware of what I was saying any more. I could hear myself but couldn't stop. Blinking, I turned my head. Some focus and stability returned. Judging from the blazing orbs I thought were faces, fourteen other people were present, all staring at me.

People stare at others for their specialness, like beauty, ugliness and craziness. Sometimes two reasons are combined, like those crazy beauties you see, you know, like Paris Hilton.

I'm not a crazy beauty. Tall and bearded, with broad, sloping shoulders, I fall into the anonymous average white man range. Add paunchy, balding and middle-aged with a worn, sagging face to my physical resume. Those attributes render me practically invisible in my corner of northwest America. Not to say that I don't have some craziness, though, but I hide the things others might think of as crazy. There's not much of that, just a little furtive soft-core porn. It doesn't involve children, animals or anything funky, just naked women that are about my age.

But here I was, at the counter, babbling at the baristas. That could make them think I was crazy. Fortunately, that feeling of a spike being driven through my forehead was fading. I guess because of my babbling, everyone watched me with the low key, "Is he crazy?" stare, because, you know, many crazies can get violent in a heartbeat. Just check the Internet or watch the tube. It doesn't take much crazy to get violent and then you don't know what might happen.

A new headache pricked me. "So nobody else sees it?" I asked, rubbing my temple, still speaking too loudly.

The world's dimness abated as someone said, "We all see it."

That rough, scratchy voice came from a tall height and fuzzy white head. *Lin*, I thought, a little unsure because his form and voice were sketchy. "We just don't think it's unusual, Randy," he went on, that he knew me. "The sky is always red. What did you expect to see?"

"Blue," I answered. "I expected a blue sky."

"Blue," others echoed with tinges of incredulous amusement, more continuing, "A blue sky," as I kept on, "It was blue when I walked down here and then I turned around...."

I shook my head, trying to dislodge inconsistencies in the lines around me. “And just like that, it was red.”

The coffee shops’ lines increased their vibrations. I put out a steady hand. The coffee urns and cups swelled into bloated mirrors reflecting light, stinging my eyes. “The sky is supposed to be blue,” I went on, hanging on. Breathing deep, I fought with my vision and the moving lines and looked again to see if the sky remained red, getting disheartened when it was. “Are you trying to tell me the sky is always red?”

Things settled again. I gained focus and stability but I didn’t trust it. Everyone was nodding at me. Several were speaking.

They were not the same people they’d been before.

Sam and Talon were behind the counter when I walked in. I thought it was still Sam back there but Sam is your average white American male, skinny with disheveled chestnut hair. This person had a Latino face and a female body. Yet, I still thought it was *Sam*. Don’t ask me why, it just seemed like something I knew. Talon – likewise I think it was him but I’m not positive because he was different – he was now a raven black man instead of a white man with frizzy black hair and an unkempt charcoal beard – asked, “Are you okay, Randy?” Big old Lin was grinning and saying, “The sky has been red all of my life and I’m eighty years old,” and someone else I didn’t know was asking, “What shade of blue, what shade of blue,” like that mattered, while Rita, deadly serious, asked, “Randy, is everything all right? Are you feeling okay?” No one driving or cycling past or walking by with dogs on leash, children in hand, gave the mid-morning sky a second look. All vibrated again as though a giant motor stirred them.

Quailing inside myself, I laughed. “Yep.” Feeling the others’ continued watching, I took a hold of myself and decided against further confession. Having them think I was crazy would probably invite unwanted attention. I hate attention. I lived my life avoiding it.

“Everything’s cool,” I lied. “It was just a joke. I was just joking. Bad one, I guess. Nobody seemed to get it. Teach me to try to be a comedian. Better keep my day job. Heh.”

“So you don’t think the sky should be blue?” the person who could be Sam asked with an abnormal female voice.

“Hell, no. I had you guys going, though, didn’t I?” Throat dry and scratchy, I chuckled and coughed. People unleashed reluctant guffaws as I kept talking, using my voice to kill the rising bedlam in my head, trying not to talk too fast and loud. “Of course the sky is red. Only a crazy person would think the sky isn’t red. Do you think I’m crazy?” I felt like the red sky screamed, “Look at me.” Feigning amazement, I said more loudly, arms extended at my sides, an invitation to inspection, “Do I look crazy? Never mind, don’t answer that. I don’t think I need to know.”

I headed for the back of the coffee house. A murky, garbled rendition of Credence Clearwater Revival doing “Sweet Hitchhiker” played from loudspeakers. Business and life in and around the coffee shop had not missed a beat as far as I could tell, except for that three second freeze when it all turned wrong for me. A dark red sky dominated outside and everyone seemed to accept it as normal.

I knew that wasn’t normal. No way.

Something crazy was going on. I didn’t want to look but the sky kept calling from above the tree line, mountain ridges and buildings. There was no way the sky has been and should be red. With God as my witness, it’s been blue my entire life except during sunset, sunrise and disasters. I’d swear on that as fact and yet everyone else seemed just as sure that a red sky was correct.

Mocha in hand, I set up my computer at an empty table away from everyone else. Pulling out my cell phone, I started calling my buddy, Ron, to ask him about it. I despise people talking on cell phones in coffee shops, restaurants and airplanes. Don’t ask me why, it’s stupid to despise them, because it’s really just like they’re part of a conversation going on with someone else, except the other person is somewhere else. What’s the big deal? Yet it bugs me so I won’t talk on the phone inside on principle.

But not talking inside meant I’d need to go outside. Thinking about going out under that dark red sky made my head feel like it was full of cement. I just couldn’t do it. I considered going into the bathroom to call Ron but calling people from bathrooms is another thing that violates my personal code. I don’t want to hear what’s going on in a bathroom and I don’t want to transmit it to anyone else, either. I

also worried about the germs my phone might pick up in a bathroom. My own bathroom is not real bad but the coffee shop's bathroom would traumatize anyone with any sort of germ phobia. Besides that, everything continued vibrating off and on. I wanted to sit and chill, hoping it would all settle down.

Turning on my system, I tapped my fingers with impatience as the system woke up. Others, still shifting and moving like their existences were being re-arranged, phased back and forth between appearances I knew and totally different looks. Some sometimes seemed to have orange skin. They kept an eye on me, what I'd call a crazy watch, to ensure I didn't do anything nutty. It sort of pissed me off but I maintained my control, vowing not to give them anything to alarm them while I figured out what was going on. My own hands weren't vibrating, a small reassuring aspect of my predicament. Neither was my computer and the table I was at, but everything else vibrated, giving my headache a headache.

I work for a corporation from home and indulge in a mental health break every day, leaving my work computer and walking to the coffee shop. If I didn't, I think I'd be freaking nuts, whiter than a ghost from the lack of sunshine and even paunchier than I am, just sitting on my ass in front of a computer all day. Ironic, right? "I was on a mental health break when I realized I was crazy." I only had an hour and a half today before my next meeting at eleven unless it was canceled. I hoped it was, checking the time on my phone. Noon, May 24th, 2000, it showed.

May 24th, 2000.

That. Seemed. Wrong.

I don't need to know the date most days. Software calendars tell me when I have meetings, birthdays and places to go. TiVo records stuff for me but I keep a general idea of the date to keep up with sports and I *damn sure* know the year. I was sure today should be late July, 2012. It was definitely 2012.

I checked my laptop. It also showed May 24th, 2000.

That *couldn't* be right but what a coincidence that my phone and computer had the same date. Maybe some software updates had gone awry, I figured.

I decided I needed to know the right date. Newspapers cluttered a basket by the busing station. I stole a handful. Showing different days, all agreed it was May and 2000. But I remember September 11th, 2001. How the hell could any American in their right mind not remember that?

And I know I just celebrated my fifty-fifth birthday a few weeks ago. I had a big party at a micro-brewery uptown and got a little stupid drunk. My birthday is in July. Besides that, last week, on July 20th, was my thirty-second and probably last wedding anniversary. No way I'd forget that nightmare when my wife got stupid drunk and loud. That was Friday. I was sure today was July 23rd, 2012. Darting back to my seat, I held onto my sanity.

Was it me or was the vibrating slowing again? I chortled in disbelief that I was asking myself such a question.

Rita and Lin sidled up. They're a pair, usually as white as skimmed milk, he twice as tall as her, a big and gawky birdlike guy. He's eighty and she's seventy-three, fellow coffee shop regulars. I love them.

"Is everything okay, Randy?" Rita asked from a vibrating, dark face. She grew taller and he shrank as I looked at them.

Feeling close to losing breakfast, I put on an innocent expression. "Sure, why?"

"You don't think the sky should be blue?" Lin smirked and winked.

I faked a chuckle. "Yeah, right, a blue sky. Not on this planet."

"Okay," he said but Rita continued appraising me so I went on, "No, I was just messing with Sam and Talon and it got out of hand, that's all. Really, I'm fine, thanks, but thanks for asking."

"Okay." Rita sounded doubtful but she turned for the door with towering Lin in tow. She always leads the way.

"Blue sky," I heard Lin say with a laugh. "I thought he was kidding but he looked so serious. He's a pretty good actor." They went out into the red sky day.

I am a good actor if they believed me. I wished I'd been kidding. Somehow I was swimming in insanity's waters. Everything on the Internet showed red skies. Today's news was for May 24th, 2000. I wanted to call my wife or sons but she was away with friends on a hiking trip at Mount Shasta. My oldest

son, Eli, was with a girlfriend traipsing around South America. I could call my son, Dylan, break my rule about calling from inside a restaurant because this was special circumstances.

Dylan lives in Columbus, Ohio. It was afternoon there so he'd be at work. He has an IT job. Dylan would screw with me but he would be honest. Finger tapping a nervous rhythm on the table, I tried Dylan's number while wondering what if he told me the sky has always been red? The lack of a phone signal saved me. Everything was messed up that could be. I considered going home and getting back in bed but figured that the way my luck was going, an airplane would crash into the house.

Ceramic dishes, plastic cups and metal silverware crashed as Sam cleared the busing station. My heart rate jumped. I made the decision to head home even though it meant going outside. I could call a cab but I was just two miles away. I was feeling sick, though, so there was justification for riding home such a short distance. Maybe I could call Ron. He's retired and might be available. It was hard to say since he kept himself busy. Then I remembered that my phone didn't get a signal. I pondered asking Sam if I could use the coffee shop's telephone.

Another regular approached before my decision firmed up. I'd seen him before but we'd never spoken. I thought his name was Rob or Rich or something like that. Something about the way he walks and speaks makes me think of him as a formal, religious prick. He's really good looking though, so I'm a little jealous of him. White but tanned, bearded and a few inches taller, which puts him about six four or five, he's a muscled, athletic guy. He exudes an air that he'd just hiked across America. His hair – some would call it dirty blonde but I think of it as almost brown – is long and he keeps it tied back. Its length is contemptuous of his age, which seems to be a few years younger than me, or maybe my age, if he's well preserved. We could be the same age, which depressed me every time I saw him. I was never sure with him. In some light he seemed as old as me but other times he looked younger.

He seemed like he was heading my way. Don't stop, I prayed to my anonymous, absent Gods. I didn't really think he would because he never spoke to me before but there was something about his approach that warned me he might stop today.

“Excuse me,” he said with a soft baritone, ending any hope that the Gods might come out in my favor, “but I was wondering, is that a Lenovo computer?” As I replied, “Yes, it is,” and started tensing, he murmured, “Mind if I take a look,” and hunkered down beside me. “I’m thinking about buying one,” he went on in the same soft pleasant voice.

Smelling sweat and soap on him and resenting the intrusion, I leaned back and looked for a fast escape. “Actually, I need to leave. I just received a message. From my boss. I need to get back for an important conference call. It’s about my job. I was just getting ready to head out.” I noticed he wasn’t vibrating.

“We know that’s bullshit,” he replied while studying my computer. “You’re fortunate that I’m here and I’ve had personality growth otherwise we would not now be talking.”

That sounded threatening. “Excuse me?”

“I know what you’re going through.”

A child squalled across the coffee shop. My intruder looked around. Laughing and chatting people filled the other tables. My crazy moment’s witnesses were gone or distracted.

“Listen to me,” the guy said. “I’m Richard. You’re Randy, right? Listen, Randy, you’re not crazy. The sky is normally blue and it was blue less than an hour ago. Trust me.”

As I wondered how he knew all this because I couldn’t place him at the scene, I replied, “Thanks, good to know but really, it was just a lame joke. Seriously, though, I need to go. I got work to do. A meeting....”

“Still doubtful. Okay, pack up. Let’s walk and talk. You need protection.”

I didn’t want him walking me home. “Protection from what? This is Ashland. There’s been one murder in three years. I’m a big boy. I think I’ll manage by myself.”

Wanting a good excuse to dump him, I checked my phone for emails. A new one from my boss arrived. I concentrated on it, hoping to outlast Richard. The email’s words were blurry. Half the words seemed to be missing, leaving me muttering at it with curses, the rest of life forgotten for a second as I vented at modern technology’s irritating shortcomings.

“You better power down if you want to leave.” Straightening, Richard stared out one of the coffee shop’s big plate glass windows. “And you want to leave.”

“I do?” I peered out the window at the red sky morning. My eyes ached anew when I did. A woman walked a big black dog past the window. Cars passed. A cyclist. Nothing I worried about, other than that red sky.

“You do.”

I braced for a confrontation while hoping it wouldn’t come to that. “Listen,” I said in what I believed was a firm but polite tone, “I appreciate your concern but I need to finish reading this email is what I need to do, and you need to move away from my table.”

“You need to leave.” Slamming my laptop shut, Richard picked up my bag and shoved the laptop into my bag and then grabbed my power supply and tossed it in. “Get your coffee if you wish.” He zipped my bag closed and said something else in a quicksilver voice but irritation deafened me.

“What the hell?” I made a move for the bag. “Excuse me, but who the hell do you think you are? Give me my laptop.”

Shoving my bag at me, Richard said, “Let’s jump to the top of the mountain of questions, answers and explanations, okay? Try to follow if you can. The Parasam shifted here.”

Hearing that, I interrupted him, “Hold up, did you say a Parasam?”

As he went on with brusque annoyance, “Yes, the Parasam,” I interrupted again to ask, “What the hell is a Parasam and what does it have to do with my computer?” It sort of sounded like something that could be connected to a computer.

“A Parasam is an overarching film of reality.”

My mind replied, “What?” and then went blank. Richard was talking but I zoned out for a few seconds. I have a simple premise for reality, that we’re here and that’s reality.

“It was likely a change forced by a power,” Richard said. “That changed reality for all except a few unique individuals like you. Everything probably looks like it’s vibrating to you. The sky was blue

but you're not supposed to remember that. As you do, you're special. Being special makes you a danger and a treasure. As with most matters, it's a contention that depends on your point of view and agenda."

"A power?" I asked, struggling through his sentences' meanings. What the hell kind of power did he mean by that?

"Yes," Richard repeated with arch enunciation. "A power changed the Parasam, which is the film of reality." As my mind checked down on *film of reality*, he persisted, "But you see and know the old reality. That makes you part of a small and special group and a danger to many, many...others."

His tone irritated me. I've heard these sales pitches before. What was he going to appeal to, my fear, greed or insecurities?

We were in the coffee shop's rear by the bathrooms and emergency exit. Conversations faltering, others watched us. I don't know why. "You keep saying that. A danger to who?" I asked.

"Hang on," Richard murmured.

Just like that, I was dismissed. You know that torqued my anger. I went to vent but Richard was distracted. He looked so distracted and concerned, I sensed something else was happening and held back.

Two guys and a girl entered the shop's front door at the other end. Regulars, they usually sit at a corner table saying nothing. One guy was blond, shoulder length hair parted in the middle, a waist of about twenty-eight inches with forty-six inch wide shoulders. Tall as me, no body fat but not muscular, he strikes me as a bit ridiculous in aged acid washed pale blue jeans, a white wife beater tee shirt, and brown thigh high riding boots. I always thought he looked like he was about to sprout wings and wondered if today was the day.

The chick with him, black haired with ruby lips, is short as he is tall, pretty but chubby, one of those kinds you hear would be gorgeous if she just lost weight. Bangs hide most of her face. Third in line was big faced Marty, paunchy as me under a green and blue Matt Hasselbeck Seahawks jersey, but taller. A Seahawks ball cap covered his head. Sunglasses rested on a large bent nose over a graying curly red goatee. I knew his sunglasses were Raybans because I'd checked. They covered mean brown eyes, pinched small and close.

Those three weren't vibrating. Richard watched them with feral intensity. Marty Raybans' face turned Richard's way. The other two saw Richard and slowed, muttering to each another. Altering their path toward us, Marty Raybans took the lead.

Whirling, Richard grabbed my shoulder. "Come on. Let's take this outside." He pulled me up, spun and went for the emergency door, busting through it into the parking lot behind the shop. Blinking against the burst of red sky, I followed, barely on my feet under his pressure, asking, "Where we going?" I noticed the door's alarm hadn't sounded.

A noisy white garbage truck blocked our way. Shoving the coffee shop door closed, Richard tipped the big metal recycle canister over and wedged it between the garbage truck and door. The show of strength stunned me. There was no way I could have done anything like that. Someone pounded on the other side of the coffee shop door but I could hardly notice it. That sky was just getting to me. I gazed up at it, becoming struck then that it seemed small and bloody looking. I don't know how else to explain it but it might have been me. I wasn't feeling myself. Palpitations filled my neck and temples. I felt like I was about to pass out.

"That will hold them for six seconds," Richard said. I really couldn't hear him well but I tried manning up and paying attention. "We need to leave," he said, scanning the world, "I don't think it's done changing. This is a half world." I wanted to ask, WTF is a half world, but he began around the truck. The driver appeared, almost colliding with him. "Sir Richard," the driver said with a swallowed gulp. The man, short, white and needing a shave, backed away. "Pardon," he went on as Richard ordered, "Move," like he was a royal asshole.

The guy moved, all right. As if I weren't already feeling sick enough, sulfide smells like cars' old catalytic convertors overtook me, forcing a gag out of me. As I pinched my nostrils shut, a shadow blocked the sun from behind. Wincing at it all, I looked up at the red sky and back to see what was going on. Whatever blocked the sun grunted and coughed. Impressions of black things were glimpsed....

Were those *legs*?

What the hell could have legs like that?

“Run,” Richard hissed.

I was stumbling into motion before he enunciated the ‘n’. Yet my ignorant brain still twisted me around to see what the big black thing was.

The sight squeezed the air out of my body. A doggish looking lizard thing, dark as a starless night, straddled the street and towered over the businesses.

“God almighty. What the hell is that thing?” I asked the world.

“Ubershadow,” the garbage truck driver said with the slight bemused edge of the condescending. If he was scared, I couldn’t see it. His answer did little for me, and I waded through the seconds with half assed understanding of what he’d said, uber, meaning super? Higher, over? Super shadow? I couldn’t recall what *uber* meant. “Don’t worry,” the driver went on, bypassing me with his tone and look, “we’ll get it, Sir Richard. I’m on it.”

Sir Richard? I mused, gathering that he commented on my newfound friend. No wonder he seemed like a royal asshole.

Waving, the driver leaped into his vehicle as people streamed out of the coffee shop’s front door. Driver door open. roaring with oily diesel exhaust, the truck surged into the black dog’s front legs. Staggering, the dog snarled and twisted and then jumped aside.

The ground shook at his landing. A dark blue Volvo wagon shot down the road. As the dog turned toward the garbage truck, the Volvo struck its back leg.

Glass exploded from the Volvo’s windows and mirrors. Steam and smoke hissing out of it, the car’s front end collapsed.

Reversing, the garbage truck backed away from the black creature. As the Volvo’s fluids ran down the street, a white middle-aged female driver in jeans and an olive green tank top scrambled from its driver side. Spinning, the dog picked the car up with its huge maw. The driver just leaped out of the way. Shaking the car, the dog heaved it into the garbage truck as the truck attacked again. Tires screaming and suspension groaning, the truck tipped up onto its wheels.

I braced myself for it to roll. It fell back onto all four wheels with a raucous grunt. The ubershadow swatted the truck with the Volvo again. Car and truck parts snowed around us, just missing my head and body. Richard pulled me along by my arm. “Come, come, *come*.”

The recycling bin banged back as the back door opened. A machete in one hand, Raybans Marty lurched out. I started moving as ruby lips and blonde guy chugged around the building toward us. A flail hung from blond guy’s hand. Had he always been carrying that? While I pondered, ruby lips flipped something silvery toward me.

Richard shoved me back as the ubershadow picked up the garbage truck in its mouth and batted it against the building. The silver thing Ruby threw whistled past my shoulder. I thought it cut my shoulder.

Richard raised a sword.

I reacted with a Bugs Bunny double take. Reflecting red sky, the blade’s edge sparkled blue. Richard and blond guy shouted. Ruby lips threw another silver thing as her first silver piece circled back to her outstretched hand. Bellowing with his machete upraised, Marty charged. A truck door landed on him, ending the moment as Richard pivoted toward him.

“Run, you fool,” Richard shouted at me over his shoulder. “Up the hill. I’ll catch up.”

His sword matched half his height. Where did that come from? As I thought about these things, stupefied as a cow chewing her grass, Richard flicked his sword and knocked Ruby lips’ second flying silver weapon aside. If he hadn’t done that, I thought it would have hit me in the face.

Even that didn’t get me going. Seeing me, Richard shouted, “*Will you run?*”

Raybans Marty shoved the door away, exposing his head, surprising me that he was still conscious or even alive. His sunglasses were crooked and his cap askew. Blood dripped from his nose and ears and was smeared across his face. “Back, you.” Richard kicked him in the side of his head. Although he strained not to let it happen, Raybans Marty fell back into the building’s side.

Two vibrating elderly women, little things, barely up to my chest, took hold of my arms. “Come along and let them fight, dear,” the shorter of the two said. A gray haired petite creature in a hot pink jogging outfit with matching shoes and socks, her nose was shrinking in her vibrating face.

I tried pulling free but her grip was more determined than my desire. Her hot pink outfit became gray and she became orange skinned. “You’re in the way here. You need to get to somewhere safe. Let’s go. This way.”

Not thinking until much later how stupid I was, I ran up the hill with her into the trailer court behind the coffee shop. God almighty, it had been a long time since I ran anywhere. Running forty yards up the hill left me breathing hard with a heart that was like to bust out of my chest. Heavy sweat filmed me. At least this red day didn’t seem as hot and humid as the blue sky morning I’d walked. White spots beaded in my vision.

“Are you all right, dear?” the little lady asked. She barely breathed hard but her taller friend was blowing pretty good.

We stopped by a tiny old mint green and dirty ochre mobile home that vibrated like an off-balance washing machine. An unseen little dog yapped inside. “I’m fine,” I said, wishing I had water, “but I seriously don’t understand what’s going on.”

“Yes, you seem confused,” the little woman said, continuing, “Poor man,” as her friend asked, “What did Sir Richard want with you?” A forked black tongue flicked out of her mouth, horrifying and fascinating.

They had no lips.

They resembled orange lizards.

They spoke.

I stared.

Regaining some control, I asked, “Who is Sir Richard?” I figured I knew but asked to clarify and buy thinking time and let my heart palpitations stop. I wanted to follow up on that poor man comment, too. Was that me? In other words, why were they distinguishing me as a poor man, like I was some kind of simpleton?

Spying a green garden hose’s end, I went for it, looking for the spigot and wishing the little dog would shut up. I hate little dogs. They’re so noisy, always yapping.

“We happened down the street as everything happened,” the tall woman said. “I saw the two of you speaking back by the coffee shop when those ruffians were after you.”

What is ‘the everything that happened’, I wanted to ask but the smaller lady said, “They weren’t ruffians, Grace. I’m almost certain they’re shreavers.”

My shoulder hurt and was bloody. “Shreavers?” I asked, not recognizing the word as Grace replied, “How do you know that, Jill? They didn’t look like shreavers to me.”

Momentarily withdrawing from the conversation, I turned on the hose, adjusted the nozzle and drank while the two talked on either side of me.

Jill began, “Who else – “

“And they were young and ill dressed.”

Grace sniffed while Jill put her hands on her hips, thrust out her lizard chin and said, “Let me finish.” Grace continued, “Well, ill dressed for shreavers. They looked like ruffians to me.”

“Are you done?” Jill demanded. “You didn’t let me finish. Now may I finish?”

“Yes,” Grace said as Jill resumed, “They – they – ruffians...ruffianssss wouldn’t have gone up against a knight.”

“You may,” Grace added as Jill went on, “That girl had curving starss, and the boyss were armed, too.”

Her changing voice surprised me. She was hissing everything. My Aunt on my Mom’s side has a speech impediment, though, so I’m pretty good at filtering out errant sounds to understand what’s being said.

“One had a mace and the other carried a machete. I saw them.” Jill touched my shoulder as Grace issued clicking sounds. “Something got you.”

“They were desperate,” Grace said to Jill and then beamed at me on my vision’s fringe as I turned to see her. “Now. What did Sir Richard want with you? What was he saying to you?”

Who the hell was she to be asking such questions? Her insistence worried me.

I finished drinking. “Sir Richard?” I figured they’d circle back to it. I remembered the sword as I washed my cut shoulder and checked it. “Is he a knight?” My mind added collateral questions like why is a knight in Ashland, Oregon, USA, in the twenty-first century, what is an ubershadow, who caused a Parasam change, how do they know Sir Richard, and why was their skin turning orange like a bad suntan? Also, I guess, what the hell is a Parasam again?

“You don’t know Sir Richard?” Grace asked as Jill said, “Sir Richard is the Crown Prince’ssth ruling authority in thiss realm.” Grace said, “Everyone knowsssir Richard.”

Their hissing was getting worse and their answers stirred more muck into my understanding. Turning off the water, I faced them. “Indulge me a second, okay? What was that black thing back there?”

“Ubershadow,” both said but in different pronunciations. Nubs replaced their noses. Their nostrils were slits.

Ubershadow, the second new word for the day after Parasam. Para means prepare or be ready in Latin. That’s what I seemed to recall from some half-assed Latin I once learned but the interpretation didn’t fit the context. “Where’d the ubershadow come from?”

“Sssomeone called it forth or created it,” Jill said. “I’m not sure how it worksss.”

“Nor I,” Grace said. “It’s magic, or finessing, way over my head.” She made a motion of something flying past her and laughed.

“Why was everyone driving their cars and trucks into it?” I asked.

Grace intensely considered me. Was that just their way? Her eyes were blue orbs, like robin’s eggs planted in her orange skinned face. She lacked eyebrows and lashes. It took everything for me not to stagger away from her.

“You don’t know that?” she asked. “That’sss the Crown Prince’sss rule.” I had to focus to understand her with her increasing sibilance. “You’ll lose your head if you don’t. They must be stopped as ssoon after as they’re born or brought forth or whatever they are. I don’t know anything about the parasssam arts.” Her hissing was worse than Jill’s. “But thiss isss what I’ve been told.”

“Oh, you won’t lose your head,” Jill retorted, “that’s utter nonsense in this age, but you will get a hefty fine. It’ssss worthwhile to do as you’re bid. The Crown Prince handsomely reimburses you for using your car to stop an ubershadow. It’s important to stop them before they gain too much strength. Hence the rule. It usssed to be that only the Prince Elite would battle them. That was under Mad Brookingssss. He’s well gone.” She flicked her tongue into a curl, opened her mouth and spat. I think she caught and ate a fly.

Grace put her hands on her hips. Her hands were more like claws. “He will behead you. It happened to Rose’s son, Michael, remember?” Listening to her was hard as her enunciation changed more. No lips and a forked, long tongue will do that to you, I guess. “Hisss wife? She had two girls with her so she didn’t attack and the Crown Prince’s men hunted her down and beheaded her. Don’t you remember?”

Understanding beheading, I touched my neck and shied away from letting associated visions from sneaking into my mind, and then seized on the chance that maybe they were from a different world where beheading had a different meaning. Yeah, that was reassuring.

Jill said more but I quit listening. Between their vibrating lizard faces and hissing voices, my health, the notion of people being beheaded and ubershadows, I was feeling sick. Finding a place behind some wilting yellow roses, I puked. The little yapper’s frenzy increased. Guess he doesn’t like people puking in his neighborhood.

“There, there,” Jill said, patting my back with her clawed hand while Grace said, “I knew he was going to be sick. He had that look.” Their voices were gravel sliding down a metal chute by now. “Yes, something is clearly wrong with him,” Jill said. “He doesn’t know what an ubershadow is, nor who Sir Richard is.”

“No, I don’t,” I agreed with a sour mouth as Sir Richard rounded around the corner with a bloody sword to one side. “There you are,” he said.

“I know,” I answered.

“Sir Richard.” Tongue flicking in agitation, Grace backed away from me. “Your friend is sick. We saw you speaking with him so we were trying to help him.”

“I’m sure Sir Richard sees that,” Jill said. “He’ssss not blind.” She blinked several times at Richard.

“I see he’s sick,” Richard said. “It’s not your concern. You may go.”

Vibrating madly as a bee’s wings, the two lizard women scurried away. Sir Richard cleaned his sword on weeds and sheathed it. He didn’t vibrate but he was dressed in armor or mail of some kind. I don’t know much about them but his gear looked hot and heavy. I thought knights always rode horses but none were around. I felt sick again.

“Come. Lead, Randy,” Sir Richard said. “Take me to your home.” At least he didn’t say, “Take me to your leader,” as I half-anticipated. That would have been too much.