

The River Knows Its Own

THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY WOODS were filled with that old magic of childhood. His thoughts suspended somewhere between dreams and memories, Jorge walked among the bright-speckled shadows like spilled coins, stepped over mossy logs with long green fingers, scrambled down stony creek beds that could have been fortress walls a hundred generations past. Early autumn in Oregon was brisk without chill, sunny without warmth—an intermediate season, as if all the Earth were held in balance.

That was the day Jorge saw the dragon.

It rustled among the trees, moving against the wind. He glanced toward the sound expecting to see a deer. Instead there was flash of dark-veined brown, like world's largest maple leaf gone half-rotten, accompanied by a smell to match, borne on a gust of air colder than a Mt. Hood glacier.

Jorge stopped. His boots squelched as they sank ankle-deep in mud the color of fresh cow manure. He stared across the banks of mist-spotted ferns that covered the ground between the boles of the trees.

What had he really seen?

Then a raven screeched in the hawthorn branches overhead. Distracted by the noise, Jorge slipped and landed on his hands and butt in mud. He pulled himself out and tried to remember why he had stopped. Shaking the cobwebs from his mind, he continued his

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hike.



Two days later, Jorge sat outside It's A Beautiful Pizza on SE Belmont Street nursing a tall iced chai. He hadn't felt the same since he came back from his hiking trip. After a few hours of futzing around at work that morning Venera had told him to get out, take the day, and find his damned head.

Given the shoestring their little water quality nonprofit ran on, she had been mighty generous with his time. That was typical of Venera. His boss was something of a witch chick with her purple skirts and weird silver charms, but she almost always knew what she was about. It was one the many things he really dug about her, though he'd never quite had the nerve to put a move on to match his feelings.

Old Volkswagens in need of valve jobs clattered past, interspersed with VW Vanagons, ancient Dodges, and all the other stereotypically unique vehicles driven by the tragically hip and hopelessly hippie types that haunted Belmont. "If you believed your own shit, you'd ride the bus," he told the traffic.

As ever, the cars didn't listen. No one listened. That was only one of the world's many problems. Getting close to Venera was one of his.

"Hey," said a woman. "Didn't you hear me?"

Jorge looked up, half hiding behind his chai cup. She was a skinny white chick with a shoe leather tan and wind-burned cheeks, muscled arms like knotted ropes, and a macramé vest that didn't show much chest. Her hair was dark brown matted dreads that almost matched the brown of her eyes. She wore a pair of faded jeans covered in ballpoint doodles that were either high art, deep social commentary or disguises for the stains.

The kind of chick Portland was full of. The kind of chick he

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liked.

A chick he didn't know.

Thoughts of Venera blew out of his head like mist on a sunny day.

"No," Jorge said slowly. "I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

Then she laughed. In that moment she transformed from earthy-attractive to heart-stoppingly beautiful, with no more than a few loud breaths and a flash of teeth like white corn. "That's okay, I didn't say nothing. I was just wondering if you heard me."

"Sit," said Jorge from the depths of love-struck awe. "Please." He waved his chai at the plastic chair on the other side of the tiny table.

Sit she did, and took his chai right out of his hand. After a long, slow slurp she smiled again, this time without the laugh. "I don't know how you can stand this stuff." She took another long slurp.

"Are we having the same conversation?"

She cocked her head, a brown bird on a green chair. "We could be. I didn't think you were the type."

"I'm not." He was ready to be whatever type she wanted. He wished like hell he'd worn his Guatemalan vest that morning.

"You're whatever type I want, right?"

Her words jarred. How had she known? "Ah..." he ventured.

"I can read the signs. Any girl does. Any girl that wants to make it in the world without a McHouse and three kids for shining armor." The smile again. She set the chai down on the little table. "But somebody told me about you."

Another slip of the mental gears. He reached for the cup, for something to do, and to feel the transient warmth of her hand. "Who?" he asked before taking a sip.

The chai now tasted old, stale, like rotten leaves and the smell of cold rock on the face of the mountain. Bending forward he spit it out, swallowed a curse, then wiped his hand across his lips and looked up to apologize.

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No one was there. The sidewalk was empty. A crow screeched like a rusty hinge as two Volvos banged bumpers and Jorge suddenly wondered why he wasn't at work. Venera would be missing him.



"Something's fucked up, man," Jorge said. He sipped on a fuzzy navel which he then set down in front of him next to some peanuts in one of those little parquet-looking salad bowls from the 1970s. Buzzing beer signs cast murky multicolored shadows across the bar top like a slow motion disco show. Silent televisions flickered through Keno, ESPN and an old Tom Cruise movie. It was the Bear Paw on a Monday night.

Clark the bartender grunted. "Something's always fucked up. Wouldn't be having this job otherwise." He drew off a pint of the latest Widmer seasonal ale for someone back at the pool tables. Clark was a huge black man, with a flaming wheel tattooed on his bald scalp, right pinkie finger missing. He wore a blue muscle shirt and those long-legged basketball shorts in red-and-blue Kansas Jayhawk colors.

"No, no, you don't get it." But Clark was gone, and for a moment that scared Jorge. Things kept disappearing, he didn't know what—or worse, who—only that they were gone.

Clark came right back, though, which eased Jorge's mind. The bartender reached for the remains of the fuzzy navel, but Jorge waved him off.

"Maybe you've had enough, friend," the bartender said.

"That ain't it."

Bar towels snapped for a moment as Clark busied himself. Then the big man chuckled. "I ain't getting out of this, am I? Tell old Clark."

"Stuff keeps disappearing."

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"You sound like my Momma. She got the Alzheimer's. Thinks people steal her underwear at night." Clark chuckled without any humor. "While she's wearing it."

Jorge felt a cold tightness in his scalp. "I don't know, man. It's like I *am* crazy."

"Mm..."

"In the woods." He drained the last of the fuzzy navel. Leaves swirled in memory. "Muddy trail, I stopped. There was something, but I can't remember what. Like it left a hole in my head."

Clark frowned. "You fell down and hit your head? Go see a doctor."

"No, no. I mean, I wound up on my ass, but not like that. Then the next day, something happened to my chai."

"Something happened to your chai?" Clark flicked a bar towel at him. "You *do* be fucked up, friend."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you."

Then a big guy, seven feet at least, covered in hair and not much else, shambled in through the padded door and took the stool next to Jorge. That was when he *knew* he was crazy.

"Try again," rumbled the big guy in a voice like rocks falling in a canyon.

"Try what?" whispered Jorge. He glanced at Clark. The bartender was dropping onion rings in the fryer and not noticing anything. I will not forget this time, Jorge thought. He began to draw a crude sketch of the newcomer on his bar napkin.

"Hard to talk."

"Hard to fucking remember." Jorge immediately wished he hadn't said it that way. This was a time to be polite.

"Hard to be," said the Sasquatch.

And it *was* a Sasquatch. Jorge was certain. "What's hard to be?"

"Listen." One massive paw pinned his writing hand to the bar. Jorge could feel the pen barrel snap as cool ink flooded across his skin. "Things move. Things change. The stones are being called to

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dance.”

He had that wrong party feeling again. “I don’t know —”

The Sasquatch interrupted. “River man. Tree man. Land man. You can listen, know. The stones dance, the waters spread. The west flies.”

Jorge’s temper welled up. “For Christ’s sake, talk some fucking sense.”

Clark turned around. “What?”

Alone at the bar, Jorge looked at his ink-stained hand. This time he remembered. Some. Love, fear, a hairy monster spouting cryptic wisdom.

It didn’t make a hell of a lot of sense, but it was *memory*. And there were words soaking into his skin, written in a crabbed script that looked like no alphabet he knew.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Clark asked as he realized what the ink mess on the bar top was. “I’m cutting you off, Georgie-boy.”

“It’s not...” Jorge stopped. He flipped a twenty on the dry part of the bar—more than he could afford, but he didn’t want Clark mad at him. Jorge had to live in this neighborhood. “I’m sorry. I told you man, I’m a little fucked up today.”

Clark grunted something and made the bill disappear. Jorge was whistling when he banged his way out the padded door. Venera would help him. She was a mystic *witchy* chick. He’d never believed that shit, but this disappearing memory stuff was right up his boss’s alley.

There was just one question. Who had he fallen in love with? It had been something different than his low-level hots for Venera.

Not the Sasquatch, surely.



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There was fire in the sky above Wye-east mtn. last night after I kilt the she-baer. I tole Whiskey Jack we shood ott to of asked them Clakkamas about the she-bear but he larfed and spit at me. We watched that fire shoot up sparks and flame and clouds witch glowed like a Chinee lanthorn. A while after Whiskey Jack passed on to snoring I spied wings in the fire. It were a lizzard bigger than all of St. Louie I swear on my Bible. Today Whis. Jack tells me I am plumb crazy. But I am go-ing to find me them Clakkamas injuns and ask about the lizzard.

-- Journal of Oregon country frontiersman Marc Beaulieu, undated, ca. 1793-1795



Jorge banged on the door of Venera's apartment. She had to be home. Monday night wasn't one of her date nights as far as he knew from office chat. Such as it was. She was very private about her life outside work.

He kept track of that dating stuff anyway. Just in case.

Light gleaming through the blinds just to his left threw thin lines on the damp concrete of the third-floor balcony. He'd never actually been inside, just picked her up for carpools to state Watershed Enhancement Board meetings and stuff. He cupped his hands to his mouth and pressed against the window. "You home?" he shouted.

The cheap aluminum frame distorted his words into a sort of industrial echo of himself.

There was no answer, but he heard thumping. Then the door was yanked open. Venera stood there wild-eyed and angry. She was African-American, head shaved, with skin darker than espresso, well over six feet and built like a mechanical pencil. Right then she wore a pair of panties a few threads away from being a thong and a torn t-shirt that was inside out and backwards.

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Jorge's pulse shot up and his mouth went dry.

"What the—" Venera shouted, then stopped. Her eyes narrowed as she studied Jorge. "You still ain't found your damned head, have you?" Though her voice was softer, she wasn't smiling.

An unsmiling Venera was often a bad thing.

He found his voice. "No, I haven't found it. But I know what happened." Sort of.

"And this involves me *how*?"

He showed her the markings on his right hand, words written spontaneously in ink.

"Ah." She stared at his hand a moment. "I see," she finally said. "Wait here." Then Venera slammed the door.

Jorge leaned against the jamb for a little while, trying to look like he wasn't a drug buyer waiting on a score. Voices rose and fell with the rhythms of argument somewhere inside Venera's apartment.

Oops.

It *was* date night. No wonder she'd been pissed. Now he wished he'd stopped at the Plaid and grabbed a six of microbrew or something. It was too late, though—he couldn't be gone when she next opened the door.

Besides, he really wanted to see what kind of person it took to score with her.



Twenty minutes later Jorge wished he'd headed for the c-store after all. He'd gone so far as to drag out his car keys, but hadn't worked up the nerve to leave after bothering Venera. The letters on his hand were starting to look blurry—sweat?—and his memories which had seemed so clear, if confused, when leaving the bar were vanishing like a nitrous buzz.

He should go home and take a long, hot shower.

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Then the door banged open again. Different woman this time, heavy chick not much over five feet tall with a sort of Filipina/blended-race look and Frieda Kahlo eyebrows. She had on a tattered Howard the Duck babydoll worn to translucency by too many spin cycles, and not much else—massive dark nipples showed through like a pair of bruised eyes.

That explained a lot, he realized. Why Venera never seemed to vibe off him the way he vibed off her.

“You know,” the woman said, “I don’t get out much.” She grinned at him, nasty and irritated. “Even when I do, I don’t get a lot of nookie.” A pudgy finger tapped his chest. “So skinny-butt Mediterranean hunks bothering my girlfriend piss me off. Now let me see your hand.”

Jorge offered his ink-stains. She grabbed him hard on the wrist like his grandmother used to do, then spread his fingers. Front, back, she flipped the hand. Back, front. She even sighted down his fingertips as if they were arrows. Or gun barrels.

He was really starting to wish he’d just gone home. This was embarrassing.

“Where?” she asked. Her expression wasn’t as hard now.

“Bear Paw over on Milwaukie, near the Aladdin.”

“Some guy just attack you with a biro?”

“No...it was...” Jorge glanced around. He didn’t want anyone listening in. The story was too weird. He leaned forward and whispered. “Sasquatch.”

“Sasquatch?” Her face went sour, like she’d eaten a bad malted milk ball. Or was talking to an idiot. “Bigfoot? Hairy pecker, about so tall?” She reached up as far as her arm would go, setting Howard’s tattered cigar bobbing on her shirtfront.

“Taller, I think,” he said, trying to keep his eyes on her face.

“And you’re not drunk.” It was a statement. “Better come in.” She turned and walked into the apartment, trusting him to follow. “Hey, V, the Lansquenet’s going to be pissed!”

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A few minutes later the three of them sat around a dinette table that boasted a ridged aluminum edge and a formica top in foam green with those little boomerang thingies running in a pattern all over. The rest of the apartment was decorated to match the table—faux-Fifties Portland kitsch mixed with metrosexual modern. The table was covered in roach burns, Chinese takeout wrappers, beer bottles and, now, Jorge's forearms.

He was very tired, but Venera's girlfriend insisted on copying the smudged letters or patterns or whatever they were on his right hand. She wasn't doing what he would have done—trying to reproduce them in lines of text—but rather executing a more-than-competent life drawing of his hand and illustrating the ink stains in place.

Venera touched Jorge's chin with her long, cool fingers. That gave him a little shiver on the spine, and he found himself wishing she meant it. After a moment her fingers trailed around his face before dropping to his shoulder, then away. Already he missed their faint pressure.

"What?" Jorge asked. He felt bleary, almost drugged.

"You ain't right, Jorge, and you ain't getting any righter. Can you remember what the hairy man said to you?"

He wanted to say, *touch me again, please*. Instead: "He was going on about rivers and trees and stuff. How I'd understand. Then he said..." Forgetting her fingers, Jorge reached for the words. "He said, 'The stones dance, the waters spread. The west flies.' And when he talked, I remembered other stuff."

"Yeah?"

"A dragon on the wing in the woods. A beautiful girl who wasn't there."

Venera got her smile back. That made him shiver again.

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"How'd you nail down your memory of the hairy man?" asked Venera's girlfriend.

"Drew him on a napkin."

The two women exchanged a glance. "Like a Scriptor," said Venera.

Her friend nodded. "You want to summon the Five?" she asked. "He's Coloring up good. A wild Skill maybe."

Venera looked thoughtful. "I'm thinking of calling Aristides instead. Back in New York."

"I know where he is."

"Well, this is his kind of thing."

"Don't you go calling him up, girl. That man is not your friend, and he sure ain't mine. You don't want the Five, we'll work this through ourselves." Then, almost grudgingly to Jorge, "Good work, skinny butt. Not a lot folks would think to do that. Even them that should know better."

"I think he *wanted* me to remember," said Jorge, who was no longer making any sense of the conversation. His ears were cold. The tabletop rushed up to meet his face.



Jorge woke up flat on his back to a pressure on his chest that made him gasp for air. He looked up into the pendulous naked breasts of Venera's girlfriend. She was straddling his belly, eyes closed, singing.

He, on the other hand, was fully clothed. Besides the view, there didn't seem to be much in this for him. And she was *Venera's* girlfriend.

In some dreams maybe, but not this one. "Um, hey, this, uh..."

Something whacked the top of his head and Venera hissed, "Quiet, fool."

So he was quiet.

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The girlfriend kept singing. It was tuneless chant that didn't stick on any tempo or key, but seemed to wander like a spring breeze. Her head swung back and forth as she sang—as if she were listening, too.

After a while she grabbed his inked right hand and pressed it between her breasts. Jorge felt his face grow hot while his penis seemed to crinkle tight and small in a sort of anti-erection. Then she opened her eyes. He would have sworn they were glowing.

"Things move." Her voice was a strange, squeaky echo of the hairy man's. "Things change. The stones are dancing, the waters are spreading. The west flies."

"Why me?" he asked.

"You do watershed conservation work," said Venera, still out of his sight line though he tried to roll his eyes back far enough to find her. Her burred voice was softer than he could remember ever hearing it. "And you walk the land. You don't just stare at hydrology reports and doodle on maps like some office dork. The land *knows* you, Jorge."

The girlfriend dropped his hand and leaned so close that her breasts nudged his chin. "There's Skilled been working forty years in the Lansquenet that don't have your kind of grounding, skinny butt. You ain't gonna be popular."

"Skilled," said Jorge. Trying not to look at her tits was making him cross-eyed. "Lands-canay. Dancing stones. Whatever. Look, I came over here because Venera's witchy and this felt like witchy business." He tried to nod, indicate his unseen boss somewhere behind him. This was definitely not the evening of his fantasies. "Been hanging around you too long, V. I think I'm going to go sleep this off."

The girlfriend got up off him, moving fast and spry for such a heavy woman. "Lost that option when you bound the hairy man to your memory. Now you can't walk away."

Jorge staggered to his feet. "No, I'm going home. Slam a double

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shot, drop a few aspirin, sleep twelve hours, it'll be like none of this ever happened."

Venera caught his eye. "I can't stop you, but that's a bad move."

He shrugged. He could start looking for another job in a couple of days. Way this was going, he'd have to. Maybe then she'd let him take her out. "I don't believe this shit anyway."

"It don't matter what you believe. The land is real with or without you."

The girlfriend finished shrugging back into her Howard the Duck top. "Next time, skinny butt, we both get naked." She winked. "More power, more fun."

Now he had an erection. Jorge stepped as quickly out the door as his dignity would allow, then trotted stiff-legged for the car. He wondered if Clark would serve him any more tonight.

All the way home, the ink on his hand itched as fiercely as any paper cut. It felt blood-warm.



He rode the Filipina witch from behind, her broad sweat-slicked buttocks pressed up against his pelvis as his cock split her vagina like a pomegranate. She pushed and tossed, growling so deep he could feel the rumbling where their bodies met. The room wasn't clear to him—an enormous black space with distant, shadowy pillars—but the sheen of perspiration on her skin was cake icing.

Jorge pulled out slick and hard, ready to cornhole her. As he slid in into the rubbery fist-grip of her anus, she turned to look at him, but it was the hairy man from the bar who grinned. The sweet, salty icing on her back turned to his fuzz. Jorge didn't usually play that way, but he was too far into the sex to stop. As he pounded against the hairy man's ass he realized that his partner's back was tattooed with a map of the Willamette Valley, from the Columbia River along his shoulders—complete with a red-orange splotch at

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the top for Mt. St. Helens—on down to Grant’s Pass where Jorge continued to thrust.

Mt. Hood sat below the tattoo of Bonneville Dam on hairy man’s right shoulder blade, the volcano an orange glare much brighter than St. Helens. Jorge found himself staring into an eye at the center of the mountain’s tattoo, a glossy, angry eye that returned his look. The eye tracked his gaze as he bucked and thrust. The hairy man began to shake with his orgasm, an earthquake rocking the valley, until Jorge was thrown off into a screaming freefall high above the textured white mountaintops that ended tangled in his sticky sheets.



Pyroclastic flows are high-speed avalanches of hot rock, gas, and ash that are formed by the collapse of lava domes or eruption columns. They can move up to 100 miles per hour and have temperatures to 1500° F. They are lethal, burning, burying, or asphyxiating all in their paths.

– United States Geological Survey Fact Sheet 060-00



Morning brought a watercolor sky and that kind of Oregon rain that was basically aggressive mist. Jorge drowsed facing the window and wondering at how humid his bedroom seemed to be. His eyes and mouth felt gritty while his entire body ached as if the fall—

That thought brought him bolt awake in remembered panic. His clock was blinking, reset by some electrical failure in the night, but that much light outside meant he was late for work. And his bed...his bed...

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Jorge was surrounded by half-rotted leaves, pine needles, rich loam. He was lying in it, like a man dragged from a shallow grave on the forest floor. The grit on his face was soil. His nails were stained brown with the stuff.

“Holy crap!” he shouted. Somehow Venera’s girlfriend *had* gotten in here last night. The two witchy-women were fucking with him. In all the wrong ways.

He picked his way through a litter of sticks and bark to the bathroom. He would wash the dirt and grime off, get to work, and have it out with Venera. There were other jobs, damn it. Other women, for that matter. This creepy shit about breaking into his apartment was for the birds.

The bathroom was blessedly clean in a relative way, no more than the usual Portland mold and shower stall grunge. Jorge hurried his way through his morning routine, plus a couple of extra rinse cycles under the showerhead—God, he hated being filthy. There was no getting rid of the ink stains on his hand. They did seem a little faded, at least. Out of the shower he picked his way back across his bedroom to get dressed.

Ordinary clothes, he thought. *Like going to traffic court*. Don’t dress to distract. Jeans and a plain green flannel shirt.

Jorge paused for a moment. Those were what he had been wearing on his last hike. When the craziness started.

He put on the clothes anyway. Kitchenette for a bottle of Odwalla organic orange juice and a blueberry Special K bar, then heading out the door with his car keys in his hand to give Venera a piece of his mind.

When he opened the door everything went wrong all over again.



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The man outside dressed like a wizard. Or more to the point, dressed like someone who thought he was a wizard. He was a short, fat white guy with piggy eyes that gleamed a dark blue over a salt-and-pepper goatee, with long hair to match. Half-moon glasses in silver frames lined with tiny rhinestones. A floppy hat of chocolate-colored velvet, large enough to lose a housecat in, covered with tiny charms. The wizard's brown velvet coat—complementing the hat—was a cross between a smoking jacket and a Renaissance fair costume, complete with large silver buttons worked in some ornate crest.

“Get out of my way, twinkle toes,” said Jorge with his best Venera-growl.

“You need me,” the wizard replied.

Jorge placed his hand flat on the wizard's broad chest. He had six inches on the overdecorated little tub. “I ain't got time for your shit.”

“The Lansquenet is interested in you.”

That stopped Jorge. He pulled his hand back. “Lands-cannay. That's the second time I've heard that word in the last twelve hours.”

“Lans-que-net.” The wizard spelled it out. Then, “Servants of the land. We, well...” He smiled modestly. “We watch over the earth, or at least our portion of it here in the Northwest.”

Jorge had a bedroom full of earth at the moment. “No kidding? You must be friends with Venera and her pet sex witch.”

“Ah...” The wizard tapped his lips, serious. “Did you happen to get the other woman's name?”

“No.” Which had been kind of weird.

“No matter.” His hand stuck out, grabbed Jorge's hand in a sweaty shake. “I am Dagobertus Magnus, Bert to my friends. A key man in the Lansquenet.”

“Wizard, right?”

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Another modest smile. "In a sense. Technically I'm an Edaphomancer. Someone whose power is, ahem, *rooted*, in the soil."

Jorge wanted to slap the idiot. "You're as crazy as they are."

"No." Bert shook his head emphatically. "Venera fancies herself a power here in the Willamette Valley, a Fluvimancer. A Locan, in the old words she prefers. Power from the rivers. But *she's* crazy. I know what I'm doing."

"Right. Look, I work for the Northwest Watershed Trust. I know from rivers. I also know Venera's a witchy bitch. Right now I got an apartment full of dirt and some real bad dreams to show for it. So you, Mr. Bert the wizard of dirt, are either going to help me get this crap swept back out of my life pronto, or you're heading right back to wing-nut central to commune with the rest of the squirrels and leave me the hell alone."

"It's the girlfriend. That one with no name. She's doing these things to you. The Lansquenet has important purposes. Her spells distract you, make you think the land is reaching out."

"I don't believe in spells," Jorge said, pushing Bert out of the way. He yanked his door shut, giving it the lift-and-twist the swollen frame required in damp weather. "I don't believe in dragons or Bigfoot or beautiful women who vanish with the wind." He stomped down the stairs, the pudgy wizard hurrying after him. At the bottom, Jorge turned to face Bert, who was a step up so that they met eye-to-eye. "I especially don't believe in an apartment full of dirt and leaves. For the love of God, this crap's enough to make me move to Los Angeles!"

"I understand your frustration," Bert said, bobbing after Jorge as he went to look for his car.

It had to be out here somewhere, Jorge thought, ignoring the wizard. He'd driven home last night. He hadn't been drunk.

"The Lansquenet can set these things to right. Venera is misguided. That other woman, a sex magician of the worst sort. Very much against all our interests. They always are. Subordinate to

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the almighty orgasm. Don't integrate with the ebb and flow of—"

"Shut up." Jorge stood at the corner of Milwaukie and Franklin.

"Where the hell is my car?"

"Oh," said Bert in a small voice. Almost a squeak.

The mist began to thicken to rain as Jorge thought about that for a moment. "Oh? 'Oh' what?"

"Did you have a little white sedan?"

"I *do* have a BMW 2002tii, yes. It's small. It's white. It's a sedan. I just don't know where it is right now."

"When I got here the city was towing off a car that had been messed up pretty badly." Bert pointed to an open spot in front of the US Bank branch across the street. Shattered glass, paint chips and odd scraps of metal and chrome littered the pavement as if there had been a collision.

Jorge walked over to the scattered junk. He thought he might have parked in front of the ATM last night. Things had been confused. And the paint did match his. Someone had thrown cat litter down over a big stain of oil and gas in the middle of the mess, and the pavement was cracked as if a heavy weight hand landed on it.

"What happened to the car?"

"Crushed by an enormous boulder. They had a big truck from Ross Island cement helping with the rock."

Crushed by a boulder? Jorge turned to stare at Bert. "You're the wizard of dirt. Did you...?"

"Soil, not stone," Bert protested. "Not my power. But can I offer you a ride to work?"

The prospect of mixing Bert with Venera was the best news Jorge had heard all morning. Wherever his car was—and he didn't believe for a minute it had been crushed by a boulder—could wait. He smiled. "Sure thing. I could use the lift."

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The QuickSand River appears to pass through the low country at the foot of those high range of mountains in a southerly direction, - The large creeks which fall into the Columbia on the stard side rise in the same range of mountain which we suppose to be Mt. Hood is S. 85E about 47 miles distant from the mouth of quick sand river. This mountain is covered with snow and in the range of mountains which we have passed through and is of a conical form but rugged...

— Journal of William Clark, November 3rd, Sunday, 1805



Bert hummed as he drove. It wasn't far from Jorge's apartment to the Watershed Trust offices at the seedy end of the Hawthorne district, but the traffic was, as always in Portland, shitty. Not Seattle-shitty, thank God, but enough. The dumpy wizard drove like an old man who didn't care when he got there.

Bert had a weird old man car, too, a slightly miniaturized version of an early-1960's tail-finned cruiser. It sported a faded two-tone paint job that had probably once been yellow and white but had averaged towards some union of flyspecked meringue over the years. The inside smelled like, well, dirt.

"Do a lot of gardening?" Jorge asked as he flipped through the owner's manual. *Dear Sir*, it advised him. Did women never buy these cars? The driver in the picture on the cover was a chick in a hat like his grandmother might have worn. He checked the date—1959.

This booklet has been prepared to introduce you to your new Simca Vedette so that you can get to know quickly your new car and enjoy all the good things in motoring it provides.

What language had that been translated from? No normal person would have written it that way. He vaguely recalled that

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Simcas were French.

"Soil," said Bert in an expansive, hearty tone as if he were launching into a lecture, "is one of the true miracles of life. There are more bacteria in a single handful of healthy soil than there are human beings alive in the world today. Less than one percent of the *species* of soil bacteria have been formally described and classified. And then there are the nematodes. By the land, let me tell you..."

And a lecture it was. Jorge read on, ignoring the man.

Naturally, the first things you will want to know are the locations of the various controls and instruments. We have therefore placed all information covering these and other driving essentials...



They stopped right in front of the head shop over which the Watershed Trust offices were located. The building was a run-down Victorian house with a poorly-executed mural of unicorns and rainbows splashed across the walls. The Simca's brakes squealed and the dirt smell was chased out of the car by a hot oil reek.

"Nice thing about being Skilled," said Bert. "We almost always find parking."

Jorge put the manual back in the glove box and tried to disentangle himself from the Medieval seat belt someone had retrofitted the car with—the owner's manual certainly hadn't mentioned them. "Skilled. Venera used that word. That's what you New Age types are calling crystal woo-woo this year, I guess."

Bert slammed his door, walked around the car and opened Jorge's door. He reached in to flip the seat belt aside. "We've been calling it that for generations. Regardless of what you believe."

It was the first time Jorge had been moved to take the wizard seriously. "I'm sorry. I just believe so little of this." He climbed out. "Well, none, actually."

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"It doesn't matter what you believe," Bert said mildly. "You're the one with the apartment full of dirt and the boulder on your car."

And some really strange dreams, Jorge told himself. It had to be a trick. All of it. *Had* to be.

He led Bert around the side of the head shop to the rickety outside stairs. Up close the crappy paint job was more visible but less obvious. You really had to have some distance to appreciate the artist's ineptness.

As they reached the door, Bert touched Jorge's elbow. "Are you inviting me inside?"

"Inviting?"

"It's important."

Jorge felt a little chill. He still thought the whole business was stupid, but the wizard of dirt clearly took it seriously.

Was there a reason not to invite him in? Venera would...what?

Irritation flooded him, making his face hot. To hell with her. She and eyebrow-girl should have been a lot more forthcoming last night. "Yes. I invite you inside."

Bert smiled. "Thank you."

Jorge pushed the door open. The little bell jingled.

"Hey, skinny butt," said Venera's girlfriend. She was leaning against Jorge's desk in the front part of the office. She gave Jorge a big wink, then licked her finger and touched her hip. "Next time concentrate a little more, *batang lalaki*. You might come to a better end."

She *knew*. She'd been in his dreams. Did that explain the dirt in his bedroom? "How did you—"

Then the little bell on the door rang so hard it popped off its mounting and rolled between Jorge's feet. The wizard of dirt stood beside him. "Well, if it isn't the Fricatrice," said Bert.

Venera's girlfriend's face shut down like sunset on the high desert. She was suddenly hard, looking a lot more dangerous than a woman in a Maggie Simpson t-shirt and Bermuda shorts had any

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business being. Her eyes stayed on Bert while she jerked her chin at Jorge. "What's the matter with you, skinny butt? You don't got enough trouble, you got to borrow him?"

Jorge felt a cold certainty that he'd made a bad mistake. Words leapt in hot defense to his tongue anyway. "He's no worse than you or Venera. At least he answers my questions."

"We did too, 'til you stopped listening." She shut Jorge out then, as if he'd never been there, focusing on the wizard. "You, dirt boy, get out. This isn't your locus."

"I was invited," Bert said mildly.

"And now you're disinvited." Venera stood in the open door of her office. She was decidedly not smiling.

Jorge's heart sank.

"We're not enemies, Dagobertus Magnus, not yet," Venera continued, "but we're years past when we were last friends. This man is my charge and charter."

"The Lansquenet knows Jorge now. His name is carried on wing and whisper, through root and tunnel, by spring and seep. He has slipped your charge, Fluvimancer."

"I believe the word you are looking for is Locan."

Bert smoothed the sleeves of his velvet coat. "Some of us stay in step with the times. Your opposition to the will of Lansquenet has been troublesome for a while, but I'm afraid you've finally crossed the line, my dear *Locan*."

"Whoever Brought your Five has a lot to answer for, *Éarling*."

"I believe the word you are looking for is Edaphomancer."

They stared at one another until Jorge thought the air would crackle. He didn't understand the underlying argument, but both Venera and Bert were angry about him.

"You know," he said, "I don't give a damn about your Lansquenet. I don't even know what a Locan is. But I can damn well tell when people are talking over my head. I've got a truckload of dirt in my apartment, my car is missing, and I'm two days behind in

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polling water districts. You guys want to fight, go fight." His voice started pitching higher. "You guys want to help me, help me. Otherwise, *shut the hell up!* Or I'm done with this. My ass will be out of here and to hell with all of you."

"You can't," the Fricatrice said to Jorge. The staring contest between Venera and Bert continued unabated. "The land won't let you."

"Fuck the land!"

Her smile was hard and toothy. "Didn't you try that last night?"

Bert touched Jorge's elbow. "Very well. I'll find you later, Jorge. The Lansquenet will make all this worth your while. We can show you your power."

Then he was gone, the door rattling shut behind him as the fire sprinklers in the office went off and the taps on the sink by the coffee maker burst free atop twin fountains of water.



Venera had chased them out of the Watershed Trust offices with an incoherent screech of rage as soon as the flooding had started. Soggy and irritated, Jorge grabbed a chair in a Salvadoran place down the street. He sat down opposite the Fricatrice. Their table was ridiculously tiny, not much bigger than a waitress' tray, hammered out of old sheet metal.

There was such a thing as taking hip too far.

"*Dos pupusas, por favor,*" the Fricatrice said to the waitress who hovered nearby. The other woman wore a peasant's linen blouse and had a nose fresh off a Mesoamerican idol. "*Y un poco de café. También, un agua del hielo para mi amigo aquí.*"

Jorge watched the waitress head back into the kitchen, then glanced out the window, looking up Hawthorne toward the office. "What was all that?"

"I assume you don't mean the *pupusas.*"

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"No."

The Fricatrice sighed. "Well, my friend, the land has awakened to you."

Jorge felt a rush of pressure in his temples, an almost literal boiling over. The logical part of him recognized the fear of strangeness and the bed full of soil. The thought didn't hold back his words. "That's exactly the kind of New Age crap you guys fed me last night, and look where it got me." He slapped the little table, toppling the tiny ceramic cube of sugar packets. "Don't *tell* me that *shit*."

"What do you want me to say? You saw a dragon, a pretty girl, a hairy man. I didn't do those things to you."

"But you were there, last night."

"You mean late, in your sleep?" She smiled again, softer this time. "In a manner of speaking, yes. You might call it magic, but that's not really what it was."

"Yeah, I know. Skill." He managed to make the word an insult, but she didn't blink. "And the dirt in my bed this morning?"

"You drove me from your dream, invited the land in my place. Like I said, the land awakened to you. It left its calling card."

"And I suppose the land dropped a boulder on my car."

"Unless you think that twit Bert did it."

"He's the wizard of dirt, not rocks."

"Right, as far as it goes. And damned good the Trust offices were on the second floor, where Dagobertus Magnus couldn't be properly grounded. You'd best believe Venera did that on purpose."

"Why did the pipes break?"

"Venera was trying to drive him away. She really is a Locan, a water wizard. Bert pulled a sucker move when he just stepped away from her pressure. She must have been angry, to lose control like that."

"At him or at me?"

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"You guess."

His ice water and coffee arrived while Jorge was thinking that over. The Fricatrice made a nasty sludge of hers with six or eight sugar packets and most of the little clay pot of cream. He kept his black, but chose to let it cool, enjoying the sharp scent of the roasted beans.

"It all comes back to what I saw in the woods," he said.

"The land is...the land. It's not a thinking being, not like you or me, but it has a mind. Purposes. A sense of self-preservation. The land is holistic. Venera concerns herself with the waters. Dagobert is one with the soil. You may be something else. Someone who can see the land's intent."

"As a dragon in the trees?"

She sipped at her sludge. "Why would the land send a stone to your car? Think in simple terms."

"To keep me from driving away, I guess. That's the most basic answer."

"Right. It wants you around for something."

He decided to keep pretending this was real. "The pretty girl the other day. The one I fell in love with in a moment. Like it wanted to bind me here."

"Good. Why?"

He remembered the map tattooed on the Sasquatch's back. "I saw Mt. Hood as a glaring eye. Orange, like fire."

Another sip. "Something is coming."

"I don't know what, though."

"I don't know, either. But the land sent the dragon to you for a reason."

"Did Venera know this...land thing about me?" He couldn't figure out how he felt about that. It bothered him to think that his feelings for her might have been manipulated by that Skill crap, too. "Is that why she hired me, kept me around?"

The Fricatrice just smiled over her coffee sludge.

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In 1862, the Oregon Steam Navigation acquired both of the portage tramways (north and south sides of the Columbia River) in the present-day Cascade Locks area. The Oregon Pony remained in operation on the Oregon side of the river while OSN reconstructed and improved the portage railroad on the north side of the river. The portage railroad on the north side of the river was incorporated as the Cascades Railroad Company in Washington Territory as a subsidiary of Oregon Steam Navigation. It was six miles long, built to a track gauge of five feet, and was built from the start to standards that would allow for operation with steam locomotives.

—A History of the Oregon Steam Navigation Company,
by Glenn Laubaugh of the National Railway Historical Society



Later they went looking for Jorge's car. The Fricatrice—he still didn't know her name, but figured that her anonymity was one of those Skill things—didn't have a car either, but she had a bus pass and she wasn't afraid to use it.

"Busses are a great place for Skilling," she told him as the number 14 rumbled fitfully toward downtown and the Portland Police Bureau. "Every kind of energy you could want, all in one place. Sexual desperation, drug addiction, ghosts—you name it."

"Ghosts." As if. On the other hand, there was all that dirt in his bed. Were ghosts any more unlikely? He squirmed in the plastic seat. "On the bus. What would a ghost want on a bus?"

"A bus is a place, skinny butt." She glanced at him with that leering smile. "A locus. Locii can be important in Skill. And to ghosts. Those poor bastards need places. Most places don't move around. Busses do. Ergo, ghosts on the bus."

Jorge studied the bus's interior. Signs overhead advised him not

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to eat, to keep his music private, where to convert his life experience to college credits. Two Mexican guys at back chatted quietly about women and work. A wall-eyed black kid bobbed his head to some private music without the apparent benefit of headphones. A pair of women dressed for the office—coming back from an early lunch, maybe at this hour?—sat not quite touching, ignoring each other and everyone else on the bus.

“I don’t know, man. It’s just a way to get around.”

“And you know what else? Skill is just a way to get by. Some people speak Italian, some people juggle, some people got Skill.”

“Juggling doesn’t attract so many weirdoes.”



All he learned at the Police Bureau was that his car had been impounded as inoperable, and he owed them \$345. Irritated but unsurprised, Jorge thanked the public information officer and left without paying. He and the Fricatrice wound up walking down by the Willamette in Tom McCall Waterfront Park. The park was a pleasant stretch of greensward a couple of blocks wide separating the Old Town district of Portland from the river proper. It was a fine example of no-profit urban planning from that long lost era when people thought their tax dollars ought to be spent on the public good instead of refunded. Later infusions of krusties, homeless and the just plain strange hadn’t succeeded in robbing the park of its charm.

Jorge studied the Willamette with a professional eye. The river’s color shifted between olive green and muddy brown depending on the light. Topsoil runoff upstream, agricultural waste, dumping from the shipping in port. And Portland had a serious problem with sewage overflow mixing with storm water runoff. The city was fixing it. Slowly.

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It made Jorge sad to see what so many people had done to the water.

"Can't eat the fish," he said.

"Rivers are bound, land man." The Fricatrice took his hand, held it as they walked.

Friend, he wondered, or guard. Guardian, maybe. Still, the warmth of her grip was comforting. It made him think of Venera. Like the three of them were a chain.

She continued her thought. "White men brought the first rails in all those years ago, tied the Columbia and the Willamette both down with ribbons of steel. Then the dams later on. Nothing but prisons for the river's spirit. Steamboats were more honest than locks and railways. At least they worked with the river, not against it."

He thought about the map on the Sasquatch's back, looked around the grassy park. "There's no steel right here."

"Redevelopment is all. Rail used to run on this side too. Still does, north and south of this break. The river, it has rail chains. Animals can't get to the water, rising mist has to cross cold iron."

"Look, maybe I can believe this land thing and maybe I can't. But why are railroads bad? People live on the land, we need railroads to live. Stuff has to get to stores, whatever. Otherwise we'd all still be sleeping with our cows in little huts. Railroads have got to be better than highways."

It was a discussion that ran endlessly at the Watershed Trust, and every other environmentalist movement that didn't fall in the absolutist camp of Earth First. Use versus conservation. People could be as passionate about this as about capital punishment or abortion.

She squeezed his hand. "You'd fit right in at a Lansquenet gathering, skinny butt. They've been arguing this point for well over a century."

"Jorge. My name is Jorge. Not 'skinny butt.'"

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“Jorge.” Another squeeze. His groin got that warm tickle. “All you had to do was ask. Jorge the land man. You could have been Brought to Skill, you know. That’s part of what the land can see in you. You ever see Colors? Like, auras on things?”

“Auras.” He snorted. “No. And I don’t need no Skill Bringing. I like being me.”

He wondered if that was true. Early thirties, single, lots of time in the Oregon wilderness, socially progressive job, dated—and sometimes fucked—socially progressive woman. If they weren’t strict vegan, and he met all the other criteria which were important that week. It had been the right shampoo in his bathroom for one chick. No animal testing here, dude. But where was it all going? He had a good time, mostly

Until the last few days.

“The land doesn’t care what you like,” she said. “It doesn’t think of you as an individual. The land is everywhere, everything. That’s why the Lansquenet is in a twist about you. They’re the servants of the land. They’ve been at it for generations. Doing good sometimes, mostly just debating themselves to death. And here you come along, some random normal as the focus of everything they’ve worked for.”

“Are the Lansquenet all Skilled?”

“Just about. Along with a few very dedicated normals. But the Lansquenet are dangerous to the rest of us. They don’t play by the Skilled rules.”

“Which are...?”

Another squeeze. He had a quick flash of his sweaty sex dream of the night before. She was taking him there again, this time in the flesh. It would be like fucking Venera at one remove. How weird that was, he didn’t know.

“Only one way to learn those rules, Jorge the land man.”

That was when he heard the dragon scream.

Jorge dropped the Fricatrice’s hand, spun with his arms out,

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already wondering what he thought he was doing. She shouted something he couldn't make out as two burly kids on skateboards ran him down—no, grabbed him.

He kicked, trying to fight the leather-clad krusties, but his thin strength was no match for their muscles. Not to mention the lassitude which settled over him almost immediately.

The Fricatrice ran after him only to be assaulted by a cloud of pigeons. Jorge tried to screech blue murder, but the same inertia which had overcome his abortive struggle against his captors seemed to have settled on his tongue.

No one was watching anyway except the ragged-winged dragon soaring high over the Burnside Bridge as the krusties bundled Jorge into the back of a faded yellow Simca Vedette.



*They tied that big old river
They dammed up that big old water
Mississippi of the West
They put you to the test
And made you into something you're not*

*There's farmers up upon them highlands
There's loggers on wooded mountainsides
Waiting for that power
Waiting by the hour
Them poor folks been waiting all their lives*

*I hear the engines moaning
I see them barge boats straining
Columbia's she's in hock
Chained to dock and lock
Only her old spirit is complaining*

— "Columbia River Blues," Abednego "Bargepole" Adams,
1940

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Jorge lay slumped in the back of Bert's Simca as the car jerked through stop and go traffic, made some turns, rumbled across one of Portland's drawbridge decks, then eventually settled into the smooth rhythm of highway driving. Maybe Interstate 84, but face down and essentially paralyzed, he couldn't lift himself to look out the windows and check. His body still wouldn't respond. It was as if he had been shot with one of those Mutual of Omaha Wild Kingdom tranquilizer guns.

"Relax." It was Bert the wizard of dirt up front, of course. "As if you weren't already. Heh heh. I apologize for the inconvenience, but the Lansquenet requires your presence. That dreadful woman was drawing you further into her libidinous spell. Trust me, this is for your own good."

Trust, thought Jorge, would be easier to come by if he hadn't been dumped in the back of a car.

"Some of us think you are Skilled, and playing dumb. For myself, I believe that you are a terribly lucky normal, perhaps a wild Skill. Or some odd project of Venera the Fluvimancer and her dreadful Fricatrice. In any of those cases, you are a significant challenge to many in the Lansquenet. I consider myself more open-minded, but that of course comes with being so, ahem, earthy."

Bert chuckled at his own wit and rambled on about nematodes for a while. Jorge studied the carpet fibers and tried to decide if the dragon he'd seen soaring overhead had really been there. And why it had looked so ragged.

That part worried him.

That fact that he was worried told Jorge he believed in the land.

Maybe he always had and never knew it before.

Jay Lake



Lack of muscle control apparently did nothing to keep Jorge from feeling all the aches and pains of his cramping body. Bert nattered on for what felt like hours until the Simca exited the highway and dipped long and slow to the right. They went through a series of tight, careful turns. Old man driving in an old man car. Jorge prayed to God the trip was almost over. Even if he was going to be manhandled by more krusties, it had to be an improvement over the floor of the Simca.

Plus he had to pee real bad.

Bert stopped for a murmured conversation—security? Why couldn't the guard see him?—then on again, winding back and forth some more, across the buzzing metal of a bridge deck, the clack of rails.

The car finally ground to a halt with a familiar squeal-and-reek. The back doors opened immediately and people pushed and pulled at Jorge to drag him out of the back seat. They were having such a hard time moving him that he figured the Lansquenet were not kidnapping pros.

"Just unbind him, then," said a testy voice, an older woman. Much older.

After that he was out of the car and up with someone's hands cradling his armpits to face a small crowd. It was like a New Age retreat. They were all dressed as outré as Bert the dirt wizard. Flowing skirts in earthy colors, beaded vests, veils, all manner of amethysts and moonstones and silver charms.

With that thought Jorge found his tongue. "The Lansquenet, I presume?" He didn't bother to hold the nasty out of his voice.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, young man!" That was the testy old woman again, a tiny thing with a pair of metal crutches. She was wrapped in scarlet silk and wearing an improbably feathered hat.

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“Make your God damned invitations more civil next time,” Jorge growled.

“Enough,” said Bert. “We should repair to our meeting.” He grabbed Jorge’s elbow, whispering, “Come on, or things might become unpleasant.”

Jorge looked around as they walked across an open parking lot. The rain had cleared during his involuntary car ride and afternoon sunlight flooded the scene. There was a scattered assortment of vehicles, most of them as self-consciously odd as Bert’s Simca. The lot was on a bluff, with cottonwood trees and sugar elms nearby, and a 1970’s-modern building ahead with some landscaping in front of it. There was water on both sides of the lot, and a hell of a lot of industrial concrete.

They were somewhere on the Columbia. After a moment he recognized the layout of powerhouses, shipping lock and islands— it was Bonneville Dam, the lowest dam on the river and a flagship project of the WPA years. That meant this had to be the Bradford Island Visitors’ Center.

Then the whole crowd clattered through the lobby of a little interpretive museum with cheery waves to the docent and small bills casually slipped into the donation box. They banged through a blue fire door into a concrete stairwell decorated with paintings of leaping salmon and headed downward accompanied by the swish of silk and the ringing of dozens of tiny bells.

The last thing he saw as Bert pushed him into the stairwell was a view of the river to the west, the ragged dragon circling over the mist-wreathed bluffs on the south side like an errant shadow.



Jorge realized that whatever the Lansquenet had in mind for him, only he could do something about it. The Fricatrice was far behind in Portland, and Venera...well, he wasn’t sure about Venera,

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except for her mounting anger. And he was under no illusions regarding the Lansquenet—they might look like a gaggle of half-stoned old hippies, but these people could control his muscles and bend his mind at a whim.

And they were mad at him. He'd screwed up whatever game they were playing with the land and their self-appointed stewardship over it.

He wondered if his sightings of the dragon had been a good thing or a bad thing. How the hell did this Skill thing work? Did he just somehow start thinking, *here, dragon, dragon, dragon*, and hope for rescue?

If it was that simple, everyone would be doing it.

After the kindness of a brief pit stop in a restroom at the bottom of the stairs, Bert marched Jorge into a largish room finished out in slightly dated museum-kitsch. Sunlit doors exited at both ends of the room. Carpeted floors, large glass cases with models of fish in them, blue directional signage painted over the concrete walls, posters with fish identification information, and a set of varnished backless benches arranged before a pair of windows behind which there was...water.

And fish.

They were in the fish counting room. And there were lots of fish. Squirming, swimming, thrashing against a turbulent current the color of old tea. Salmon, shad, lampreys, all in a boiling silver mass against the windows.

Jorge stared. In September the salmon run was trailing off. It was way late for shad. Lamprey were rare at any time.

The land was reaching out to him. He could feel a slow wave of cold-blooded intent through the windows. Something between panic and anger.

Then the Lansquenet swirled around him. Fingers brushed against his cheek, touched his hair, plucked at his clothes. It was like being mobbed by the Gray Panthers.

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That was when Jorge realized what was odd about the Lansquenet. They were all old. Bert was the youngest, given Jorge's not very precise impression of the others, and even Bert had to be in his fifties. Venera was exactly the same age as Jorge—thirty-three—and he'd bet the Fricatrice was still in her twenties.

That had to mean something. Where did the younger Skilled go to serve the land? People of his generation and the kids coming up after cared passionately about the environment. The Skilled among them would be naturals for the Lansquenet.

On the other hand, there was certainly a near-violent opposition between Venera and Bert.

Bert tugged Jorge around the perimeter of the room to stand in front of a smaller door which stood ajar very close to one of the fish windows. Inside was a video set up and a metal-faced board of switches sort of like an old-fashioned mechanical calculator, all facing another fish window.

The fish counter's station. And no doubt the Lansquenet had sent the fish counter out for coffee with a side of amnesia. Or maybe arsenic.

Jorge grinned in spite of himself.

The old woman in scarlet stood in front of the fish windows with her hands pressed together like a Buddhist at prayer, crutches propped against her elbows. She closed her eyes, began to hum, and quickly the chatter of Lansquenet died down. Someone rang a bell—silver, no doubt—and the old woman's humming reached a crescendo.

"Honor to the earth that is mother to us all," she intoned.

"Honor to the earth," echoed the Lansquenet.

Jorge took advantage of their moment of ritual to count heads.

"Honor to the air that lends us life with every breath."

"Honor to the air."

Twelve, fourteen...

"Honor to the water that fills our veins and slakes our thirst."

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“Honor to the water.”

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Plus the old woman in red, Bert, and himself.

“Honor to the fire that is in our bellies and in our souls.”

“Honor to the fire.”

She opened her eyes and stared at Jorge. He was surprised to see that her irises were almost as orange as the eye on the Sasquatch’s back in his dreams.

Dreams.

Was that his way out?

“This gathering of the Lansquenet is now in session. I am Edith, a Pyretic of the witch line of Joanna and as senior-most I name myself speaker of the gathering.”

“Honor to you, Edith,” said the Lansquenet, their response more ragged than the tight timing and cadence of the opening ritual.

This was nothing like the aggressively casual way Venera and the Fricatrice seemed to approach their magic.

No, he thought. *Skill*. Call it what it was for them.

Jorge wondered if he did have Skill. Was Skill really like Italian? Or juggling? The Fricatrice had suggested it was just another talent, after all.

“Our Great Unbinding is near its end,” Edith said. Jorge was startled at the venom in her voice. “A project we have worked toward for two generations. And those...children...in the city claim to have found a new favorite of the land. As if any Landesmann could arise now in the Northwest from outside our ranks. The Lansquenet is all.”

“The Lansquenet is all,” repeated the audience.

That echo was starting to creep him out pretty badly. At least he was beginning to understand the reluctance of the younger Skilled to join the Lansquenet. He was torn between a sense of their silliness and fear of their seriousness.

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"You!" Edith pointed at Jorge. "Why do you set yourself in opposition to us?"

"Me? Your boy Bert sought me out. I've got nothing to do with opposing the Lansquenet."

"You have set yourself up as a false Landesmann."

"I don't even know what the hell a Landesmann is."

"You claim to have called the land to you. You claim to have seen it in dreams. You claim the land has followed you, spoken to you, become one with you."

His night-dream of the Fricatrice and the Sasquatch had definitely been a "becoming one with" kind of experience, but Jorge wasn't about to discuss that with Edith. "I don't claim anything here. All I know is I've been kidnapped and brought against my will."

"Easy, Jorge," said Bert, still standing beside him. "Those are strong words. We're your friends. Edith's just doing *pro forma* business."

"*Pro forma* my left foot, Dagobert," said Edith. "This little punk isn't going to interfere with the Great Unbinding. Not on my watch."

"And what is the Great Unbinding?" asked Jorge. Behind him the fish counting windows rattled slightly. He felt a chill, like he had that day in the woods, and his mouth tasted of old leaves and cold stone.

This was close to the heart of whatever crisis had sent the land to him in the first place, he realized.

"Nothing that concerns you any further, young man."

Could these nuts make Mt. Hood erupt? That would explain the orange eye in the Sasquatch's back, and his warning about the dancing stones. But he couldn't even begin to imagine why they would do such a thing. Mt. St. Helens was a sufficiently recent memory here in the Pacific Northwest to keep anyone from having fond illusions about the restorative powers of volcanic eruptions.

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The river. That was why they were here, in the fish counting room. "You want to free the waters," he whispered. The dancing stones would be the dam collapsing.

Bert jabbed Jorge in the ribs with his fingers. "Shut up, boy. Don't ask for trouble."

"So you do have a head on those pretty shoulders," Edith said. "Water is the blood of the land. That blood is bound by steel and concrete, which we must overcome. You raise yourself as a false Landesmann in opposition to our work, claiming power over earth and air, water and fire."

"You're not listening to me!" Jorge shouted. "I'm not opposing anybody in anything." Now he *was* lying. The thought of these nuts blowing the Bonneville Dam horrified him. But he couldn't fix that right now. Not yet. He had to get out of there, alive and with his memories intact. "I can't help it if something came to me. I don't know what it was. I don't want to know."

Don't deny the land, whispered a voice in his head. The dragon? The Fricatrice?

He heeded it. "Maybe it was the land," he continued. "I've seen miracles of water and earth this very day. But this has nothing to do with the Lansquenet. If it is the land, the land chose me."

"Lies." Edith literally waved Jorge off. She was flushing to match her fiery silk wrap. "Self-serving piffle. The Lansquenet are the servants of the land. If it sought a true Landesmann, it would have reached among our worthy Edaphomancers and Fluvimancers and Aeolians and Pyretics."

The members of the Lansquenet murmured as Bert's grip on his arm tightened to the point of pain. Hard gazes turned on Jorge. He saw his death in pursed lavender lips, long glossy fingernails, swept back graying hair, the pulled-tight crows feet of angry eyes. It was like being cursed by every grandparent he'd ever met.

And so this comes down to jealousy, he realized.

Edith placed her palms together again. "I call upon the will of

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the Lansquenet in this matter.”

How was he going to get out of this? Jorge had no doubt of these peoples’ menace towards him. Bert wouldn’t meet his eye now. The crowd of Skilled were talking amongst themselves in the indistinct muttering voice of a mob, angry cadences rising and falling.

Landesmann. Power over earth and air, water and fire. Which meant...dirt in his bed and rocks on his car.

But he’d been distracted, almost in a dream state when he saw the dragon. The same for the girl. And asleep and truly dreaming when the Sasquatch came and the dirt happened.

The soil in his bed proved the Skill-magic was real.

The voices of the Lansquenet were trailing off. Agreement was being reached. To his right, the fish squirmed against their windows, their presence a cold pressure against his mind.

I have to dream, Jorge thought. The land comes when it wants to, as dragon, woman or Sasquatch; but I can only call it to me in my dreams.

How the hell was he going to dream on demand?

He could pick a fight, right here, but they might just as well kill him as knock him unconscious. He couldn’t make a break through the room and out the doors—and how the hell were there doors down this many flights of stairs?

The bell rang again. Edith looked far too satisfied with herself for Jorge’s peace of mind.

“I’ll speak for you,” said Bert quietly.

Right, Jorge thought. *Dreams. Now.* He urgently imagined the ragged dragon swooping down from the cliffs along the south bank, skimming from mist to sunshine like a falling leaf to rescue him.

The fish swirled against the glass like fingers tapping on a windowpane.

Fish. Fish don’t dream, but I do.

Just as Edith began to pronounce judgment, Jorge threw his

Jay Lake

elbow hard into Bert's ribs, following up with a punch that slid past the dirt wizard's jaw but clobbered him in the ear. Then Jorge stepped backward into the fish counter's station and slammed the door.

It had a deadbolt lock, which he threw. He dragged the desk with the video equipment in front of the door.

There was a tall, narrow window next to the door, partially obscured by a fish poster. He could see Edith hammering on the glass with one metal crutch, so he grabbed a couple of other posters that were hanging in the tiny office and crammed them into the metal-framed space of the window.

"Screw you, fire-woman!" Jorge shouted.

Then he turned to face the fish.

They mobbed this window now, thicker than ever, a solid wall of scales, fins and colors. What he had thought at first glance to be silver was a mass of glinting hues, from red-bodied sockeye salmon to the rainbow sheen of the steelhead.

Jorge tugged the counter's chair right up to the glass and sat down, leaning his head against the window. The cold pressure was the hand of the river on his forehead, like a mother checking a fevered child. Fish flickered in front of him.

"Send me some dreams, guys," Jorge whispered as the pounding began.

He pushed his thoughts outward toward the fish, following that pressure they had been placing on him. It was like counting sheep. One by one, his thoughts left, each carried away by a single fleeing fish, until he slipped into unconsciousness even as the door behind him hummed and smoked with the anger of the wizards of the Lansquenet.



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Scars left by the powerful current mark the high narrow walls of the [Columbia River] Gorge to this day. It is evidence that the water got deeper and deeper. As water filled the narrow channel, the depth reached more than a thousand feet. The flow accelerated to 90 miles an hour, gathering an increasing payload of debris. The Gorge contained most of the raging water—an overwhelming torrent aimed directly at what is now Portland.

—David Hulse of the University of Oregon in
Ice Age Flood: Catastrophic Transformation of the West,
Oregon Public Broadcasting



The ragged dragon circled over the three islands in the Columbia, stiff with the scent of damp firs and forest mold. Watching over its shoulder, Jorge could see the narrow lines of concrete stretching from bank to island to island to bank like the garden paths of a drunken industrial giant. Water upstream glittered placid behind the great walls, while downstream it boiled from the spillways and powerhouses. The islands and dams themselves were a complex arrangement of cranes and railroad tracks and vast metal gates, power lines strung between them on towers painted orange and white, the whole thing tinker toys for the giant's child.

He shifted his attention to the dragon itself. Its wings were a vast, mottled patchwork of autumn leaves and narrow veins of wood, an airplane built by woodland spirits. The body was little more substantial, a prickly collection of twigs and pine needles like a giant thatch ant nest.

In a way, it was a giant maple leaf in flight. Jorge clung to the dragon's wooden spine with hairy hands that seemed familiar, though they were not his own in waking life.

Down, he told the dragon.

Jay Lake

His gaze slid toward the parking lot of the visitors' center out on Bradford Island in the middle of the river. A familiar faded yellow car sat near the front doors, surrounded by faux-gypsy redwood camper shells and pre-Jerry Garcia VW bus-pickup hybrids.

There.

As the dragon circled closer, Jorge tried to figure out where the fish windows were. He quickly realized that the building was four or five stories tall, the front which faced the parking lot actually being the top of the building. From the other side, the structure descended with the slope of the bluff that was the center of Bradford Island until it footed in a little maze of walkways, landscaping, and the narrow, churning channel of a fish ladder.

The other side of the building.

The dragon swooped lower, creaking like a forest in the wind. A walkway bridged a lower one that seemed to lead to the bottom level of the visitors' center. The dragon spilled air from its wings to come to a shuddering landing on the bridge. It extended its neck downward and peered into the double glass doors where the lower walkway met the building.

A pale face pressed against the doors from the inside for a moment, then vanished with a shriek.

Jorge smiled with satisfaction, and jumped from the dragon to shamle onward in rescue of himself. On the ground, he realized how huge he was. The map tattooed on his back itched, up by his shoulder the hardest.

He burst through the doors without opening them first, howling and venting his musk in the spray of glass splinters.

✦

The River Knows Its Own

Jorge's head snapped back as he jolted awake. For a moment he felt witless. The fish were gone, leaving only tea-colored water behind. The counting station reeked of electrical smoke and incense.

Outside, people were shouting.

There was no other way out except through that room.

He somehow felt overly short and thin as he pushed the table back from the door, as if he'd returned to childhood. The door handle was too hot to touch, so he grabbed one of the fish posters from the narrow window and wrapped his hand in it.

Out in the fish counting room there was chaos. The varnished benches were overturned as people surged back and forth. The Sasquatch from Clark's bar—and in fairness, from his dream—roared an incoherent challenge as it shambled through the room. Most of the Lansquenet were either panicked or awestruck. A swirl of red caught his eye as Edith fled by the south doors all the way across the room, followed by Bert, his brown velvet coat flapping.

And if Bigfoot was in here, the dragon must be outside the north doors.

Jorge pushed through the crowd as hard as he would have moshed at the Aladdin. These old dudes might have made the scene at Woodstock, but they'd never done smashmouth punk. And no one had the concentration for Skill-magic at this moment.

As he made his way toward the dragon, Jorge could have sworn the Sasquatch winked at him. Then he was out the shattered doors in sunlight, staring into a vast pale eye the texture and color of a queen ant's abdomen.

This is it, he thought. This is where the dreams and the magic and the frou-frou New Age Skill bullshit become real.

Not the dirt in his bed.

Not the boulder on his car.

This dragon of leaf and wood and insect parts, that he could mount and fly to chase down Edith and Bert before they did something truly regrettable to Bonneville Dam.

Jay Lake

Do you believe? he asked himself.

He patted the dragon's mossy muzzle just below the eye. It reeked of the land, forests and fields and cold, hard mountain rock—much ranker than the gentle pine scent of his dream. "Did you come for me, girl?" It was a she, he realized. Was all the land female?

Not the Sasquatch, certainly.

The dragon's head dipped a little further, nearly pulling her off balance from her perch on the walkway above. Jorge grabbed the neck, which despite seeming so fragile took his weight easily, then hoisted himself up to sit above her shoulders, just before the roots of her wings.

She leapt upward, flapping hard to make air, spiraling away from the visitors' center and the roadways surrounding it. Jorge clung to her rough-textured neck in a spot where all her materials seemed to come together in one leathery skin and watched for the flash of red that was Edith's silk.

He'd never spot Bert the dirt wizard from up here.

As they rose higher, he glanced for the parking lot. The yellow Simca was still there. Then he saw the color he was looking for. Edith and Bert were by the north side of the first powerhouse, the dam section linking Bradford Island with Robins Island where the navigation lock was.

"There they are!" Jorge shouted.

The dragon wheeled and dove. Swooping toward the powerhouse, his gut finally felt the reality of being in the air, essentially unrestrained. He felt a moment of eye-watering panic tinged with vertigo before that was overtaken in turn by the realization that the dragon was diving right into the north wall of the powerhouse.

There were three tall metal doors there, each large enough to pass turbine sections or generator housings. Jorge prayed the dragon was going for one of those instead of the solid concrete of

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wall.

And go for them it did, Jorge screaming his lungs out as the dragon exploded against the central door in a cloud of dust, dirt, sticks and leaves. The door ripped open with a boom like a giant's footfall as Jorge was thrown inward, riding a wave of forest debris to tumble flat on a concrete floor surrounded by interpretive museum signage.

The dust settled as klaxons began to wail. Venera stood up from behind a picture of the dam being built. "What the hell took you so long, Jorge?" She was smiling.

His heart jumped in his chest. "Oh, God." He wanted to kiss her, but there wasn't time. "Edith," he gasped. "Bert." The roiling dirt made him cough.

She cocked her head, nodding down to the powerhouse floor.

Jorge pulled himself to his feet and looked.

They were on an observation balcony at one end of a room that had to be a thousand feet long, and at least ten stories high. Generator housings receded into the distance like a series of mechanical wedding cakes, while a partially-assembled turbine awaited more blades on the floor beneath them. The hub of the turbine was about the size of his lamented car.

The walls and floors were tiled in ocher-and-brown geometric patterns, ornamentation from an age when people built even industrial facilities to please the eye. The safety orange of the overhead gantry cranes was a jarring contrast, as was the red Corps of Engineers logo painted on the nearest generator housing.

"Damn it," he said, recovering his breath. "They must be out on the generator floor already. Now what?"

Venera's smile grew toothy. "This is a dam powerhouse, Jorge. We're standing *on top* of the Columbia River. Fire-woman and earth-boy down there are about to learn not to fuck with a Locan over running water."

Jay Lake

In that moment, he knew his love for her was real, not just a crush or a Skill charm. And he thought he could see a spark in her eyes, too. Grinning he asked, "Can I watch?"

"Count on it, Landesmann."

When she leapt over the rail, he followed her without even looking first.



They scurried around the downstream curve of the second generator housing. Equipment carts stood nearby, and their sightlines were obscured by cabling and pillars. Everything smelled of machine oil and the tight, crispy tingle of lots and lots of electricity. Doors boomed open to the distant shouts of security guards. Jorge reflected that you could hide a boatload of old hippies in a place this big and complex.

Venera placed a hand flat on the generator housing. The great slab of metal hummed slightly. Jorge could feel a vibration through the floor. "How are you going to—"

"Shh." She waved him to silence and bowed her head for a moment. Then, "The water tells me. It doesn't like Pyretics. Natural opposition."

"Is that why she wants to blow the dam?"

"Water is power, Jorge." Her fingers brushed his, sending a spark of static between them. "Now come on."

They sidled on around the housing, keeping as close as the cabling and support struts would allow. Venera pointed at the next housing.

Judging by the echoes the shouting security guards seemed to be getting closer.

Jorge scurried after Venera as she dodged across the open space between the generator housings. She did not pause this time, but kept racing around the curve toward the upstream side, fingers

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trailing against the metal.

The hum from this turbine sounded different to Jorge, as if it were spinning harder. Was she calling the water? He tried to feel the force of the land in his mind, the water flowing as its blood, but outside of his dreams, Jorge had little control.

Love or no love, he would have felt better if the Fricatrice had been around for this little showdown. Strength in numbers.

Venera stopped suddenly. "Get your lousy asses out here, *now*," she shouted. "No more warnings."

A brilliant snake of flame came arcing around the generator housing. Venera ducked it without losing her contact with the housing, while Jorge simply hit the floor. It splashed against the posts behind him supporting the service catwalk that reached the tops of the generator housings. Sparks spit where it hit—a power connection cut?

"Hey, Landesmann." Venera's voice was distant, as if she concentrated hard.

The turbine was definitely whining hard now, the concrete floor thrumming.

"What?"

"Keep them off me another minute or so. And if I can't get the genie back in the bottle, you'll have to ask the land to do it."

"I don't know—"

Then a shambling man-mound of sticks and leaves and soil came around the curve of the housing.

A sending from Bert. Made from the remains of Jorge's ragged dragon. There wasn't anyplace else to get that much organic matter from down in here.

It was like peeing in a church. "God damned dirt wizard!" Jorge shouted.

He sprinted past Venera and charged into the man-mound shoulder first. It was like running into a tree. Jorge bounced off, his arm in agony.

Jay Lake

The man-mound reached for him with a large, indistinctly formed fist.

Jorge backed up, banging into some copper piping stacked against one of the pillars supporting the catwalk overhead, perhaps waiting to be installed as a water line. He snagged an eight-foot length and used it to stab at the man-mound.

Keep it at bay, keep it at bay, he thought. At bay was fine for a moment or two. How to kill it?

The concrete floor was vibrating now as smoke poured out of the generator housing. Another flame snake shot toward them, but it became diffused by the smoke.

Jorge stabbed again and backed toward the pillar that the first shot had hit.

Bert's sending still followed him.

"You were a dragon," he told it. "Spirit of the land. Look at you now. Bert's made you a mockery of yourself."

The man-mound took another swipe at him.

Jorge could hear sparks spitting overhead. He prayed he wasn't about to bump into a hot line. A quick glance upward showed a slagged junction box.

Aha. Good. Do this just right, he might live long enough to see what Venera was going to do next.

The shambling thing took one step closer and Jorge leaped. He jabbed the back end of the copper pipe into the slagged junction box, feeling a harsh buzz in his palms as he made contact, then spread his hands and fell away, thinking: don't ground yourself, idiot.

The far end of the pipe drooped toward the concrete, spitting sparks, as the man-mound grabbed at it. Power from the junction box grounded through the man-mound. Flares arced all over its body to erupt in bursts of flame as the leaves and wood burned off.

Jorge ran around the other side of the generator housing without waiting to see more. Bert's sending was occupied, and there

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wasn't any more soil handy to make another—he hoped to God—but he had to distract Edith from shooting more flame snakes, at least until Venera finished her Skilling.

He caught up with Edith and Bert standing over a glowing box. Edith turned to him and shouted, “Aristides will—” just as the arc of the generator housing closest to them burst open with a torrent of Columbia River water, thick with fish.

Somehow, Venera had reversed the turbine and called the water *up*.

It was like a liquid bomb going off. Bert was caught full force by the water jet and smashed backward into the upstream wall of the powerhouse, pulped by the pressure along with dozens of salmon and steelhead. More fish shot out at angles to fall into the glowing box and buffet Edith like giant silver fists. A whole new set of alarms began going off overhead, barely audible over the roar of the river.

Jorge could have cheered. Venera had succeeded. The Lansquenet's spell had been disrupted. But now the genie definitely needed to go back into the bottle, fast. Already the rushing water was tearing at the adjacent sections of the generator housing, and flames shot up out of the top.

Jorge grabbed a wildly thrashing male sockeye, bright red. The fish took a bad bite of his left hand. He held it close to his temple, trying to think in cool, crisp, simple fish-dreams. “Back,” he told the water. *Help me, ragged dragon.* “Back.” *Help me, Sasquatch.* “Back.” The pretty girl drinking his chai smiled, and for a moment the fish was not so cold.

The roar of the water abated then, dying quickly. When Jorge opened his eyes Edith was nowhere in sight. He dropped the sockeye and pushed through the mass of wriggling fish to find Venera curled up on the ground, fingers still on the generator housing. She seemed smaller, wrinkled like a used condom.

Discarded.

Jay Lake

I am the Landesmann, he thought. I can bring my love up out of this place.

But there were men with drawn guns and bullhorns on the catwalk overhead, and he had nowhere to go. He scooped up Venera anyway and ran for one of the service doorways leading out to the downstream face of the powerhouse. Bullets whanged off the concrete but missed him as he plunged through the door.

Outside was a roadway with inspection ladders leading upward and downward across the face of the dam. A helicopter clattered overhead, and a whole new family of sirens screamed out here. He just kept running, across the roadway, and leapt into the high space above the lower reaches of the Columbia.

As he fell, still holding tight to Venera, Jorge could see the fish below him parting like hands to admit him to the river's depths.



He came up sputtering for air like every drowning man who'd ever lived. The water was September cold. Power lines marched in the distance upstream, but no one was shooting at him.

Where was Venera?

Jorge splashed around, looking. She wasn't with him. She wasn't nearby. He struck toward shore. Maybe he could spot her from a rock.

"Hey," said the pretty woman in the birchbark canoe. She was dressed differently today, in buckskins to match her boat.

"Venera," he said, grabbing the side for support. Where had this girl come from? She'd done it to him again. "My..." He didn't know what she was. "Thin black woman, a Locan. She's out here somewhere."

"No. She's not. The waters have claimed her." That laugh, the one that pierced his heart all over again. "The river knows its own."

Though it pained his heart, Jorge had to believe her. He was the

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Landesmann, she was the land.

The girl helped him into the canoe, smiling like she kept all the secrets of the world. A little while later, they landed on a tree-topped gravel bar. She slipped out of her buckskins and offered him some of those secrets, but he refused, miserable for Venera. She smiled and held him to her breast a while and sang river songs until he slept.

When he awoke near sundown with her earthy scents still on him, the land-girl was gone, but her canoe remained. He paddled his way through the evening fog back to Portland, thinking hard without reaching any conclusions.



Jorge didn't know what else to do, so he went back to work the next day. His body ached terribly, and getting dressed was a hassle with all the dirt scattered around his apartment, but the long walk from his neighborhood to the Watershed Trust office seemed to work out the worst of the kinks.

The office was a mess, of course, from the sprinkler incident the day before. The sight of the wreckage made him want to kneel down and weep for Venera, but he could imagine what she'd say about *that*. He had to act as if she was coming back.

So instead he tried to do some actual work. Venera had cleaned up the worst of the flood, and somehow his computer had been spared, though there was already mold growing on the monitor.

Jorge logged into oregonlive.com to see what was what. He hadn't even tried the radio at home. An aborted terrorist attack at Bonneville Dam was all over the headlines. One generator had been badly damaged in the incident, but far worse consequences averted. Apparently a quick-thinking group of senior citizens had spotted some radical environmentalists on the prowl and alerted security. There was mention of a single unidentified casualty. He wondered

Jay Lake

what had become of Edith.

“That Lansquenet,” Jorge told his monitor mold, “always one step ahead.”

Later as he was spreading out files to dry, the Fricatrice turned up with two cups of Salvadoran coffee—hers sugar sludge, Jorge’s black with a sharp odor that cut right through his fatigue. She was wearing a Trixie t-shirt today, from the old Speed Racer cartoon, and a pair of bicycle pants several sizes too small for her. She gave him a big, sloppy kiss, as if they were old lovers. “You did the right thing, Landesmann.”

He asked the one question that was on his heart. “What about Venera?”

“The river knows its own. Maybe she’ll be back. She’s tough.”

“Not tough enough.” He brushed the warm sting from his eyes, but he realized the Fricatrice didn’t look sad at all. He figured she understood more about all this than he did. Maybe Venera was coming back.

After he regained his composure, Jorge said, “I never could figure it out, you know.”

“¿Que?”

“Coming down the river last night, I couldn’t figure why the Lansquenet wanted to blow the dam. I mean, I understand about the river being chained by steel rails and concrete dams. But they have to live here, too. We’re all part of the land, us people with our cities and everything.”

“Water is power, *batang lalaki*.”

“I know, but why release it?”

She slurped on her sludge, took some time answering. “They got a...vision...for the land. To return it to what it was. Maybe they’re not even wrong. I don’t know. But as for the river...anybody can feel the power of impounded water. Why do you think there are so many stories of lake monsters? It ain’t like there’s really dinosaurs swimming around down there with the frog shit. Water

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holds the memory of what has passed through it, and what it has passed through. Water holds secrets. Water holds death in its murky bonds.”

“Like ghosts on the bus. Water is a place. A locus, you said.”

She winked. “Exactly. A place that’s everywhere and nowhere, always moving. Now maybe you understand what it means to be a Locan like Venera. People who don’t have elemental Skills, they think it’s fire that’s hard, always changing, always calling. Pyretics, they got it easy. Throw a few tantrums, get on with life. Water’s the toughest master.”

“So why release it?”

“Think of all the power they’d have. There would be a flood, a tiny little Missoula, the symbol of the scouring the Lansquenet would bring to the northwest. Restoring the land. And then the Skill power the flood would give them. Spells to move mountains. Or erase cities.” She slurped again. “But they made one big mistake in their thinking—the land is always changing. People are just another part of the change. You think Kennewick Man didn’t pee in the river or fish for salmon? Erasing man’s hand from the land is like trying to put Mount St. Helens back together.”

“Yeah.” Something else bothered him, a loose thread. “And Aristides?”

The Fricatrice stared over the plastic lid of her coffee cup for a moment. “Where you hear that name?”

“You and Venera, that first night. Then Edith the Pyretic started to say something about him when Venera blew the generator housing.”

“Forget him. He’s a different kind of problem. Lots of people think he’s their friend, they’re all wrong. There isn’t a side he hasn’t played. You ever hear from him, you run the other way. Then maybe you call me for help.”

Jay Lake

Jorge smiled. "How would I do that?"

"In your dreams, baby."

After a moment, he realized she wasn't kidding. "I see."

"No. You don't. But you will. Good-bye, Landesmann." She stood, gave him another sloppy kiss, and walked out.

