

THE LINES

Chapter One

The meteor slammed mercilessly into the earth. Its impact instantly liquified the native rock and created a fireball twelve-thousand miles in diameter and a crater six-hundred miles wide.

The melted material took five-thousand years to cool.

Then . . .

Metamorphosis.

Erosion.

Sedimentation, glaciation, uplift, subsidence. More than two-hundred-million years passed before humans came upon the scene. By then, a mountain had formed in the center of the crater, surrounded by a lake. From bird's-eye view, the formation now appears as a circular ring of water surrounding an imperfectly round island. Situated in the northeast range of the North American continent, it resembles a white, snow-covered eye, surrounded by sparkling, black water.

It is called "The Eye of Quebec."

The mountain protruding from the island is studded with huge crystalline formations emerging from the native rock. Known as Mount Babel, it appears to wear a crown of diamonds. Upon closer inspection, the structures are revealed to be vast greenhouses protruding from the top of the mountain. Beneath the largest of these structures is a castle, and it is here that Jourdon Cartier makes his daily presentation to the king.

King Louie had anointed Jourdon to the position of "Grand Meteorologist." Despite the magnificent title though, he was little more than a weatherman. Which is not to denigrate the profession. But in a climate of constant clouds and ice, predicting the weather was no more complicated than reciting the events of yesterday. Ninety percent of the time he was accurate. And the other ten-

percent? Barely different. A little more snow. A momentary glimpse of sunlight. Perhaps a cold rain in the midst of summer.

A tall man in his mid forties, Jourdon Cartier had a professorial air about him. A splash of grey around the temples. A mustache. Physically fit.

He stood before the king in the reception chamber. King Louie's "throne" was actually a small couch, but it was placed on a raised dais, giving it a quasi-regal feel. His wife, Queen Ida, sat beside him in an ornate, straight-backed wooden chair, more befitting of a throne, although it appeared to be quite uncomfortable.

The uncomfortable one though, was King Louie. Uncomfortable with the role into which he had been born. A man in his late sixties, he had a paunchy belly, a bulbous nose, and long shaggy hair. He longed for adventure, but was saddled with a role for which he was ill-suited. So, he lived through other's adventures, vicariously.

He leaned forward from his throne. "Tell me, Monsieur Cartier, are we to be crushed beneath the weight of a glacier today?"

Jourdon chuckled. He liked the king. He considered him a kind, but not brilliant, leader. He had seen an image of a Cocker Spaniel once in a book at the library. There were no dogs in Mt. Babel, of course, but Jourdon had a certain fascination with them. King Louie was the perfect personification of a Spaniel.

"No, my liege. The glaciers have long receded, many decades ago."

It was true. Once, about fifty years ago, the glaciers had threatened to engulf Mt. Babel. But, as the earth began to recover from the Great Calamity, temperatures gradually increased and the glaciers receded. The air was still unbreathable, and people could only survive outside the enclosed city by wearing hazardous materials gear. And the skies were still perpetually cloudy, the temperature outside always hovering around freezing.

The king tugged on one ear. "Pity. It would be so exciting to see them swooping down from the mountains, again."

"Well sire, glaciers are not particularly prone to 'swooping.' But, I guarantee, if there is any 'swooping' to be done, it will not be today."

“Well, that’s reassuring, I suppose.” He glanced at Queen Ida. She, as usual, said nothing.

If Jourdan thought the king resembled a Cocker Spaniel, the queen was certainly a German Shepard, with her black and gray hair swept up along the sides of her head. She had a threatening look, tempered only by an air of boredom. Of the two, Queen Ida appeared the more intelligent, simply by virtue of keeping her mouth shut.

The King frowned and continued his questioning. “And our dam is in no danger of being breeched by ice flows?”

“No sire. Even though Le barrage Manic-5 is old, it is not threatened by the ice. I believe it is still functioning quite admirably, but that is a question better suited for the engineers.” Indeed, the dam, completed in the year 1968, was already one-hundred-eighty-seven years old. Once considered the largest multiple arch buttress dam in the world, it still produced sufficient electricity to power the city of Mt. Babel.

In the entire Kingdom of Quebec, there remained but one city, and it began as a hole in the mountain. Mount Babel was remote. The climate was cool. It was eminently defensible. It had provided the perfect conditions for a repository of seed stock.

Shafts had been bored into the rock leading to climate controlled vaults where all the original lines of seed were kept. At the surface, the multifaceted greenhouses channeled light down into the tunnels.

At the time of the Great Calamity, the city of Mt. Babel housed only a few thousand people. Afterwards, the facility became one of the very rare places where lines of heirloom seed could be found. Cleverly, the executives of The Seed Repository did not deplete their prized asset. Rather, the only seed commercially available was genetically engineered to be sterile. They soon cornered the market.

As The Seed Repository grew wealthier, the city also grew. Housed beneath its crystalline greenhouses was an architecture of opulence, including towering spires, an immense castle, a fine research library, and many fancy French

restaurants. The denizens of the city, born of scientists, engineers and academics, were intelligent, sophisticated, and proud.

Since there was no one to argue with him, the director of The Seed Repository had proclaimed himself King of Quebec. There were virtually no other people in the kingdom outside of Mt. Babel. Only vast frozen wastelands surrounded the island. Before he passed his reign on to his heirs, he had built his opulent castle under the largest of the crystalline greenhouses.

It was in the chambers of King Louie, from the fifth generation of Mt. Babel royalty, where Jourdon Cartier stood.

The king raised his eyebrows with a hopeful expression. "Will we be getting a ray of sunshine today, Monsieur Cartier?"

"I would like to say so, sire, but as you know, it is merely February, and we usually get no respite from the clouds at this time of year."

"*Oui*," the king said, dejectedly. As with most people in the Kingdom of Quebec, King Louie spoke a mixture of French and English, the latter being more useful for communicating with non-francophiles. "It is a pity, though. I feel my people would be happier if they could be bathed in sunshine."

Jourdon couldn't agree more. Ever since the Great Calamity, more than 115 years ago, the sky had been dark. During Jourdon's lifetime, he had briefly seen the sun no more than a dozen times. It was always a cause for celebration in Mt. Babel, and people would spill out onto the plaza beneath the greenhouse roofs to enjoy the moment. But it was fleeting, and soon the king's subjects returned to their homes, most of which were built into shafts bored into the mountain. Light scoops on the surface channeled feeble daylight down these tubular towers, but the city was mostly illuminated artificially.

The king sighed and slouched down on his couch. Jourdon sensed his meeting had drawn to a close.

Standing in the shadows behind the royal couple was the sergeant at arms. Jourdon thought of her as a Doberman, an imposing black woman, almost two meters tall, her musculature lean and taunt. Her completely bald head caught the glow of the lights as she stood absolutely rock still. Although her hooded

eyes always focused straight ahead, she absorbed every detail as though steeped in a tea of information. She had a uniquely subtle way of communicating. A barely perceptible nod of her head confirmed Jourdon suspicion. He was dismissed.

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In the evening, Jourdon returned to his quarters. Despite the relative wealth of the city, his apartment was small. A weatherman's salary did not command more. Not even the royal weatherman. But space in Mt Babel was a luxurious commodity, so the typical apartment was quite efficient.

He flipped on an overhead light and tossed his key in a basket by the door. Sitting on a stool, he reached down and took off his shoes, replacing them with a pair of slippers. After donning a cardigan sweater from the closet, he walked three steps over to the kitchen. He filled a teapot with water, placed it on the two-burner stove and turned on the heat.

The rest of his studio apartment, other than the bathroom, was visible from the kitchenette. A small sitting area with a comfortable couch and side tables. A dining table for two. And a Murphy bed, folded up against the wall.

In a corner on the way to the bathroom, Jourdon had built a study area. Two filing cabinets supported a desk, which in turn held an antique-brass lamp. But the space was primarily dominated by books. Shelves of book. Piles of books. Books on the desk and the floor.

While the water heated up, Jourdon placed some tea in a strainer. His mind was elsewhere. He stared without focus on a spot above the stove until the teapot began to whistle.

When the tea was ready, he took it over to his desk and set it on a napkin. Switching on the light, he grabbed one of the dining room chairs, sat down at his desk, and turned to a book which was already opened.

Among the men and women of elegant pedigree, Jourdon Cartier had what many considered to be the most boring job in the world. Many considered

Jourdon Cartier to be no more than a “weather jester,” appointed merely to entertain the king.

Contrary to popular opinion though, Cartier thought his profession to be fascinating. Although he had never left Mt. Babel, Jourdon Cartier considered himself an explorer. He was chasing something. A folly? A dream? He called it “The Theory of Habitable Places.” He believed there existed regions of the planet unmarred by the Great Calamity. Perhaps they had grown back over the years. Perhaps the holocaust had skipped over them.

Studying the weather, he looked for “rain shadows.” Where plants grew. Where the air was cleansed by wind and rain. Where people could live with nature, unenclosed from the encumbrance of the city. A place to begin again. Outside. Under the sun.