

LEAR'S DAUGHTERS

BOOK ONE

DELUGE

“. . . rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters . . .”

KING LEAR
Act III, sc. ii

1.

The little man huddled high among the storm-bound cliffs, a young man, within the dark and weathered skin of an ancient. He sat cross-legged, alert in his cramped stone shelter, his slim body hooded and swaddled in a nest of furs and wool. The narrow door leaked cold light from a white and swirling sky. Fine snow blew in to pile in the folds of his blankets.

His head inclined as if listening. His breath rimed the rough rock with frost. One brown hand smoothed a strip of tooled leather against his thigh. He adjusted two edges between thumb and forefinger, eased the leather onto his knee and resumed his sewing.

The wind moaned at the open doorway. The gales pounding his shelter had long ago buried the trail that threaded down the cliffs. Beyond his shallow ledge, the land vanished into storm, a roaring chaos of cold and white, ordered only by the deft logic of his bone needle: hover, like a ravenous hawk, swoop to the resisting leather, pierce and pull up, thread taut, to hover and swoop again, in time with the soft swell of his breathing.

Between one stitch and the next, the tempest died.

The little man's glance flicked up and outward, probing the sudden silence.

A cry came from a distance above, so faint even in the utter stillness that it might have been imagined. The bone needle froze in a downward swoop until the cry came again, repeated now from nearer by. The little man nodded, unthreading his needle. With disciplined haste, he folded it into the soft leather, and then into a pouch sewn to the inner layer of his woolens. His ringleted hair grazed the ceiling dome as he gathered his blankets into a pack slung low across his back. He glanced around the shelter, patting at his chest with an absent frown. His fingers burrowed among leather and wool to squeeze a carved blue stone strung on a knotted thong. He blinked, an anxious tic, then pulled on gloves, hugged his furs about him and crawled into the open.

The snow fell gently now. The blind whiteness coalesced into a landscape. The little man surveyed the towering curve of cliffs that rose sharply on either side into mountains, range after range of silver-white crags fading into the whiter distance. A long stride from the door of his shelter, the ledge fell away in a sheer, dizzying drop.

Out on the plain below, a tall silvery cone rose through the snow cover. The little

man's gaze lingered there, noting no change since his last reconnaissance. Past the object's oddly symmetrical bulk, the white plain stretched away to hide beneath a lowering cloud cover.

The shrill cry and its echo came again. When a third and closer call took up the relay, the little man answered, and heard his trilled reply carried back, voice by voice, up into the frozen mountains behind. With a grimmer nod, he fastened his furred hood, cinched the wrists of his leather mittens and pivoted down the icy trail.

He moved cautiously at first, easing the cramp out of unused muscles, searching the drifts for hidden dangers, but working at last into a fast, stiff-legged lope that sent up sprays of powder with every falling leap. Arms flung wide, he banked into his turns, racing along angled ledges where spires of bare rock broke through the ice and snow. At each hair-pin switchback, he leaped and swerved, leaped and swerved, building up speed in a controlled fall down the mountainside. Along the lower reaches, the drifts drew up about him, slowing his progress. He plowed through ungracefully, furs and eyebrows crusting with white.

Lower still, the deep snow pack hardened under its own massive weight. The trail closed over to form a tunnel that dropped through drifts compacted into solid ice. A ghost of daylight filtered in to guide the runner's way, dimming with each descending step. Near the base of the cliffs, stone ledges pierced the floor to warm the icy gleam with glimmers of rose. The little man ran an urgent slalom around every twist and obstacle, slowing only when the tunnel leveled out.

Then, where a second passage met at right angles to the first, he skidded to a stop.

This tunnel was larger, and rigidly square. Yellow sand cut the slickness of its floor. A hard white glow reflected along its walls from around a distant turn. The little man hesitated at the intersection, catching his breath. He kicked at tusks of ice shattered along the bottom of the walls. Someone had cleared headroom among the icicles crowding the ceiling, someone much taller than he. He started up the smaller tunnel. Its cool greenness slid away into watery dark as it curved back toward the cliffs. He stopped again, sighed, pressed his jaw with a balled fist and turned into the harsher light. The square tunnel widened after the first corner, then straightened like a ruled line. The little man took up a reluctant jog, his footsteps sending up a chattering cascade of echoes, until the

tunnel made a right-angled turn and dead-ended in a wall of ice.

Again, he halted. The hard translucence was incongruously broken by a silvery, perfect circle three times his height, exuding warmth and bright light. He squinted into it and shoved back his hood. At the other end of the shining cylinder, bodies moved in a confusion of whiteness. Voices rose in unfamiliar syllables, murmurs mixed with strident debate. The little man lingered in shadow and reflected light, half-blinded, hopeful of invisibility, then cupped reluctant hands to his mouth. By the time his bellowed message had echoed into the space beyond, he had whirled around and was gone.