

PROLOGUE

He forded the river as the daylight died, and blundered into thick undergrowth between the birches on the far bank. Sobbing with fright and pain, he raised his hand to his chest and felt the hard point of the arrow sticking out through his coat. He dared not look down for fear that the sight of it would make him faint, so he shut his eyes, took the bloodied wooden shaft in both hands, and snapped the head off. Pain knocked him to his knees. Groping behind him he found the feathered end of the arrow where it stuck out above his shoulder blade, braced himself, and wrenched it out. He ripped his handkerchief in half and crammed the pieces into the wounds.

He was a stranger in that country, an explorer, a scientist, a soldier of fortune. His name was Auric Godshawk. In years to come, when age slowed him, he would be king of London, but on this night he was still in his prime, a strong Scriven male in his sixtieth year, the age hardly showing. That must be how he had survived the ambush, he thought. That must be how he had managed to escape into these woods. Black trees, gray sky, the first

stars showing. Cold now that the light was gone. He wished he'd brought a hat with him, or gloves. He supposed he had left them behind in the inn or camp or wherever it was that he had been when the ambush happened. His memory seemed to be missing vital chunks. He felt as weak as London wine, and when he looked at his hands they did not seem to belong to him at all: frail, girlish things they seemed, turning blue where they were not crusted with his own blood.

Black trees and a starry sky and his feet crunching through the leaf-litter with sounds like someone munching on an apple. Great Scrivener, what would he not give for an apple?

Then he was lying on his side on the ground, and he knew that if he did not rise and make himself go on he would lie there forever, but he could not rise. He thought of London and his young daughter and wondered if she would ever know what had become of him, and he said her name to the night, "Wavey, Wavey," until it made him start to cry.

And it was daylight, and the stink of mammoth was all about him as he opened his eyes. The animals stood around him like shaggy russet hills. Men moved between their tree-trunk legs. They were talking about him in words that he could not catch. He wondered if they were planning to save him or finish him, and he said, "Help me! I can pay you. . . ."

One of the men drew a knife, but another stopped him and came and crouched at Godshawk's side. Not a man, he saw now, but a girl, with her long hair escaping in mammoth-colored curls and tendrils from under her mammoth-fur hat. Weak as he was, Godshawk brightened. He had always had an eye for pretty girls.

“I am Auric Godshawk,” he told her. “I am an important man among my people. Help me. . . .”



He was lying among furs in a nomad tent, and nothing moved except the shadows on the low, curving roof. He was burning hot and he tried to push the furs off, but the girl was there and she pulled them back over him and touched his forehead with her hand and held it there, and it was so cool, and she whispered things to him, and the light of a woodstove was on her young face and in her red hair. He had seen her before. He remembered her sitting on a mammoth’s back somewhere, watching as he went by.

He tried to speak to her, but she had gone, and now an ugly old man was leaning over him, chanting, singing, humming to himself as he made passes over Godshawk’s face and body with a strange talisman of bones and birch bark and scraps of age-old circuitry, jingling with little bells. He propped Godshawk on his side and scooped bitter-smelling slime out of an Ancient medicine bottle and smeared it into the wounds in his chest and his back and bound poultices of moss over them. “Your Ex-rays have come back from the lab,” he chanted, and he held up a sheet of mammoth-skin parchment so fine that the light of the fire shone through it, and Godshawk could see a childish skeleton drawn there, with red-topped pins stuck in to mark his wounds.

When he woke again the man was gone; the girl was back. He lay watching her. A tall girl, big-shouldered and broad across the hips, not a bit like the willow-slender, speckled Scriven women he liked, but her long autumn-colored hair was lovely in the firelight

and her eyes were very large and dark and she made him remember faintly a few of the pleasures of being alive. He called and she came to him and when she leaned over the bed with the loose strands of her hair falling down across his face, he said, "Kiss me, mammoth-girl. You'd not deny a last kiss to a dying man?"

Her smile was sweet and quirky. She stooped and touched her warm mouth quickly to his cheek. "You are *not* a dying man," she said.

And he dozed in the warm gloom and dreamed of his daughter, Wavey, but for some reason he saw her not as the little girl he'd left behind in London, but as a woman nearly as old as he was, and woke up weeping, and the girl was there with him again and held his hand.

"I dreamed of my daughter . . ." he tried to tell her. He could not explain. Everything was so strange. It was all sliding. His memories were as slippery as slabs of broken ice on a pond. Something was terribly wrong, and he had forgotten what it was. "My little girl . . ."

"Hush," she said. "You're feverish."

For some reason that made him laugh. "Yes! I am feverish. . . . I am Feverish. . . ."



And it was night and he was alone and he needed to pee, so he clambered out from under the fur covers and the night air was cold on his bare skin and the embers in the woodstove glowed, and as he reached under the bed for the pot he saw a movement from the corner of his eye and looked up, and there was a girl in the shadows watching him.

She was not his mammoth-girl. In his confusion he thought

for a moment that she was Wavey, and he started up, and she rose, too, but as they walked toward each other he saw that she was a stranger; a Scriven-looking girl, watching him with wide-set, mismatched eyes, one gray, the other brown. Poor mite, he thought, for she was a Blank; the Scrivener had put no markings on her flesh at all. There was an angry star-shaped scar above her breast, and as she reached up to touch it, he reached up, too, in sympathy and understanding, and felt the same scar on his own flesh. Then lost memories started rushing past him like snow, and he stretched out his fingers to the girl's face and touched only the cold surface of a looking glass.

His own numb fear looked back at him out of her widening eyes.

"No!" he shouted. They both shouted it, him and the girl in the mirror, but the only voice he heard was hers. "I am Auric Godshawk! I am *Godshawk!*"

But he wasn't. Godshawk had died a long time ago. What remained of him was just a ghost inhabiting the mind of this thin girl, his granddaughter. Her name, he suddenly recalled, was Fever Crumb.

And once he knew that, he could not stay. These thin young hands were not *his* hands; these eyes were not *his* eyes; this world was not *his* world anymore. With a terrible sadness he let himself be folded down, like an immense and wonderful map being crumpled into an impossibly small ball, and packed away into the tiny machine that he had once planted, like a silver seed, among the roots of Fever's brain.

With his last thought, as he left her, he wondered what had brought her here, alone into the North Country with an arrow through her.